

SUNSET
RANCH



ST. GEORGE
RATHBORNE

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA
SAN DIEGO



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

SUNSET RANCH

E. L. Lyman



SUNSET RANCH.

26766

SUNSET RANCH

*A BOY'S STORY OF ADVENTURE
IN THE WEST*

BY

ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

AUTHOR OF

"CANOE AND CAMPFIRE," "RIVAL CANOE BOYS," ETC.



NEW YORK
STREET & SMITH
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1901,
By STREET & SMITH

SUNSET RANCH.

CHAPTER I.

THE TENDERFOOT.

The western sun was hovering above the level horizon, as though loath to say his "good-night," when a weary figure on foot, skirting a muddy "buffalo wallow," with a faint show of eager anticipation, climbed the slight rise beyond, whence a sweeping view of the everlasting prairies might be obtained.

A smooth-faced boy, the tired pilgrim appeared to be, whose rather showy corduroy garments, while fashioned somewhat on the ranger and hunter model, bespoke the Eastern tailor rather than the tough and well-seasoned garb of a prairie-roving "cow puncher," with greasy leather overalls or "chaps." When he had "topped the rise" and cast one quick glance hither and yon, a groan of bitter disappointment broke from his dry lips, in spite of his apparent nerve.

"That settles it—I'm lost, beyond a shadow of a doubt, and with a pretty good chance of spending my first night alone on the open prairie," he said, dolefully.

Somehow he shuddered at the prospect. The vast solitude surrounding him like an ocean, appeared so tremendous, so overpowering to one accustomed to city life, or, at most, a brief vacation

with companions in the great woods of the Adirondacks or Maine.

The lad appeared to have considerable determination of character, while perhaps lacking in those sterling resources which seem to come so naturally to Western boys, often forced to depend upon themselves and compelled to meet the hardships of life at an early age.

At least, upon finding himself face to face with ill luck, he set manfully to work to make the best of a bad bargain.

One last lingering glance cast around, more to get his bearings than in the faint hope of discovering distant signs of a camp-fire or the white-topped prairie schooners that constituted the freighters' caravan, from which he had wandered so disastrously.

The sun was half out of sight, and the scene was one to arouse a sense of admiration in almost any human heart, but, facing a night of lonely vigil upon the broad prairie, surrounded by unknown perils, young Cuthbert Lee was hardly in a state of mind to pay much attention to these things—the poetic was overwhelmed by the practical side of his nature.

He strove to remember all he had read and heard about camping on the open plain, but made sad work of it—a little actual experience is always worth a ton of theory. Of course, he could make some sort of a fire, being possessed of matches, but the prospect of supper was exceedingly vague, seeing that he had nothing to cook.

One thing he noticed that gave him some encouragement—less than half a mile to the left the ground was broken more than usual—indeed, the presence of a bunch of trees in that quarter made him suspect the presence of a ravine or coulee, which would afford an excellent camping spot.

Accordingly, with a little show of animation, he dragged one tired leg after the other and drew near the place.

Twilight had come, when objects take on a weird aspect, and the boy was considerably startled to see a skulking gray animal slink from the shelter of the few trees, losing itself in the long grass.

"Pshaw! Doubtless a cowardly coyote, more scared than myself. At any rate, I'm not going to be thwarted. Here I am and here I expect to stay for the night."

With that he picked up a piece of fallen timber that afforded a fair cudgel, and giving a husky shout, dashed into the motte of cottonwoods.

If there were other animals nearby he saw no signs of their presence. With almost feverish haste he began to gather material for a fire. Having fired the sage brush he heaped dead branches upon the pile and presently a cheery roar announced that his object had been accomplished.

This done he set to work securing a goodly pile of fuel for use during the long and weary hours of the night that was already settling fast around him.

Utterly fagged out at last the youngster threw himself down where the tufts of buffalo grass grew thickest, and began to face the situation.

Never had the darkness seemed so intense, and even the pitying stars were blotted out of sight by masses of clouds that had arisen since sundown.

The wind moaned at intervals through the cottonwoods, and to his excited imagination the spirits of the air were holding carnival, as though mocking his distress.

Luckily he was possessed of an average amount of nerve, such as became a lad whose parent had won more than his share of fame during those dark days when his native State, fair Virginia, was overrun roughshod by the armies of the Federals; for

Cuthbert Lee's home had been in the ill-starred Shenandoah Valley.

The hooting of owls and barking of prairie dogs in a gopher village close by were sounds with which he had become somewhat accustomed, so that they gave him no uneasiness; but presently other noises of the night came to his ears that somehow strained his nerves to their utmost tension.

He recognized the familiar yelp or bark of the sneaking coyote, to whom the blaze was a beacon of fear, and he judged from the chorus of sounds, that quite a pack of these jackals of the prairie hovered near by.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!"

What was that long-drawn, mournful howl that pierced the darkness of the night with startling force, causing the lone camper to clutch his sturdy cudgel and stare into the pitchy gloom with bated breath? It was a gaunt gray prairie wolf that gave tongue—he had heard it once before, though safe at the time behind the rampart of freighters' wagons, and could never forget the dread sound.

Flashing into his mind came all the stories he had ever read concerning these bold animals—of hunters attacked and borne down by mere force of numbers, to fall victims to the sharp, snapping fangs of the gray prairies—of travelers on the snow-covered Siberian steppes chased by a troop of gaunt wolves, frequently overwhelmed and forced to fight for life. The prospect was not pleasant, to be sure.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!"

To his dismay a second howl of the same hideous tenor came from a point opposite, and a third sounded in the distance. The boy-camper sprang to his feet in alarm.

Evidently his situation was perilous in the extreme—what would he not have given for the new Winchester repeating rifle that had been fastened to

his saddle and carried away when his treacherous cayuse took a notion to stampede while the boy was examining a curious gopher village with its strange denizens in the shape of rattlesnakes, owls and prairie dogs! Regrets were useless—he must do the best possible in the circumstances.

One thing he remembered in this emergency—that all wild animals, from the royal lion of the African forest down to the hyena and coyote, have more or less fear of fire, and hesitate to attack a human being who has taken refuge behind a barricade of flame.

Bearing this in mind he endeavored to arrange matters so that he might have such a protector on either side, although this state of affairs promised to make sad inroads upon his limited stock of fuel.

As time crept on he noticed that the signal howls seemed to come from various quarters, as though the hungry wolves had drawn a circuit around the camp.

He might have taken refuge in a tree had he not doubted his ability to climb the cottonwoods with their smooth trunks, destitute of branches to quite a dizzy height.

The night wind fanned the flames and sent the smoke scurrying aloft in fantastic wreaths that added to the weird aspect of things in general.

And through the darkness at intervals came that weird howl:

“Yip! Yip! Yip!”

Taken altogether it was a night never to be forgotten by the young fellow to whom the experience came as an unwelcome guest. By degrees the prowlers around the camp grew bolder as their fear of the snapping flames became less acute, and it was not a great while before Cuthbert discovered a very savage pair of yellow orbs glowing amid the dusky

shadows marking the extreme limit of the firelight circle.

Very hungry looking and cruel these eyes appeared, and obeying a sudden impulse, the beleaguered boy snatched up a blazing stick and hurled it flaming and hissing in the quarter whence the alarm sprang.

He had a fleeting glimpse of a dusky form slinking precipitately away, but his exultation was short, since other equally venomous orbs glared from new quarters.

Evidently the wolves were closing in—inch by inch they shortened their circuit, gaining new courage constantly until at length, grown desperately bold, one would leap from cover, to be followed by the rest.

The prospect was so appalling that even a full-fledged prairie hustler might have felt his nerves quiver with such a battle on his hands, and surely this Virginia lad, armed only with a stout heart, and a cudgel that must prove a mere mockery of defense, might easily be pardoned for experiencing deadly fear as he faced the situation.

Help there was surely none, so that he need not waste his breath in vain shouts, save as they might serve to alarm the creeping beasts around his fire line.

Indeed, if there existed human beings within five miles of his camp, the chances were about three to one they would turn out to be hostile Sioux Indians on the warpath, or worse still, some of the desperadoes who haunted the overland trail to the Black Hills, bent upon deeds of plunder in holding up stagecoaches or freighters' caravans.

Having about exhausted his slender resources in the matter of defense, the youngster firmly grasped his one weapon and with clenched teeth awaited the attack. Men of his house had met death bravely in

mortal combat with the armed foe, in defense of the principles that were a part of their State existence; and he believed that, his first fear having passed away, he could show himself a worthy scion of the famous family.

At least he would not have long to wait in such a condition of dread suspense, for the hungry beasts were growing impatient, and were creeping closer all around.

He calculated that there must be at least five of the enemy, far too many to admit of the slightest hope on his part.

"If I only had my gun!" he muttered. "What sad havoc I would make among these miserable prowlers, had fortune but left me that faithful weapon!"

Nearer still!

The pilgrim from the East gave one last agonized look alow and aloft, in the hope that some avenue of escape which had hitherto eluded him might be opened at this moment, but the only result was despair.

All, then, was lost save the chance of laying about him vigorously to the last and doing all the damage his desperate muscles were capable of executing.

Had he been prairie born, with keen ears, able to detect and define every sound that the night wind carried, he might have discovered reason for encouragement; but with death staring him in the face the dull thud of horse's hoofs coming down the wind was quite unnoticed.

He had already decided which one of his four-footed adversaries he would have to deal with first—the largest and fiercest of the pack, bolder than his fellows, and actually undaunted when Cuthbert, with a shout, had hurled another blazing brand close to where he had drawn his quivering, attenuated body.

Nor did he err in this conclusion, for it was this

identical beast that suddenly leaped from his covert and made a desperate dash for the lad.

Perhaps young Lee had played the national game of baseball at college, but certainly he never swung a bat with truer aim than when his cudgel whistled through space, to meet the springing brute in mid-air.

It was a center-shot, deserving of a "home-run"—the momentum acquired by the gray poacher in his forward leap was entirely overcome, and more than that his body received such an impetus that he was sent whirling into the fire, from which he immediately sprang, amid a shower of sparks, a badly-singed but possibly wiser wolf.

So far as it went this was good enough; and had he been given a fair chance the youngster felt he could hold his own against the gray hosts, treating each in turn to the same dose of medicine.

It chanced unfortunately, that his assailants had views of their own in the matter, which conflicted sadly with his own.

Encouraged by the attack of their savage leader, and evidently in no wise deterred by his dolorous fate, the rest of the bunch made a concerted rush toward the object of their hate.

It was the crisis.

The lad saw numerous gray bodies rising into view. He could detect glowing orbs and even the gaping red jaws which held two rows each of cruel, white teeth already whetted for their feast.

Hardly was he given time to recover and assume a position of defense when the hungry beasts were upon him.

He struck out manfully, with a desperation nerved by despair, and sent a couple of his four-footed enemies tumbling over each other, yelping and snarling as they tossed about; but a third pounced upon his

back and clutched a coat sleeve between his teeth, thus rendering the desperate boy almost helpless.

Though driven nearly frantic by the condition confronting him, Cuthbert would undoubtedly have struggled manfully to the last gasp.

Fortunately there was no need, since the approaching hoof strokes were close at hand and signaled the advent of a newcomer on the scene.

There was a shout not unlike the wild war-whoop of a Sioux brave plunging into the thick of battle, a rush of horse's hoofs and then the sharp ringing salute of a heavy six-shooter, the "gun" upon which every cowboy and range rider depends in an emergency, and with which he generally becomes remarkably proficient.

Cuthbert's fierce assailants seemed to recognize the doom of their assault in this new advent, and deserting their expected prey, sought shelter in the surrounding gloom; but two of them remained upon the battle-ground as evidence of the skillful handling of the newcomer's gun.

Cuthbert could hardly believe in his good fortune—it seemed as though he had been virtually snatched right out of the jaws of death by almost a miracle.

He strained his feverish eyes to see through the smoke, whether his new friend were red or white.

Expecting to discover a brawny teamster, or at least a veteran cow puncher, grizzled and bronzed and muscular, he was amazed to find that the figure on the back of the yellow broncho was that of a boy younger even than himself, and smaller of build.

The "kid" was garbed after the manner of a cowboy and sat his saddle with the air of one who considered it no difficult task to "bust bronchos" and wear out the most vicious of prairie horses without "pulling leather" or taking his hands from the bridle.

Brown as an Indian, keen of eye and with an air of determination about him that gave much promise of future manhood, the newcomer charmed the tenderfoot, whose ambition it was to mount the dizzy heights attained by this youngster with such apparent ease.

Seeing that the other had, to all appearances, come out of the scrape with little harm beyond a torn coat and a few scratches, the rider on the buckskin horse indulged in a hearty boyish laugh.

Doubtless to him the ludicrous side of the adventure loomed up, but poor Cuthbert had passed through such a fearful experience that he was more or less rattled, and while he grinned in sympathy, it was more because he felt under heavy obligations to this new friend than in a humor to join in his merriment.

"That was a pretty close call, stranger," sang out the angel who had delivered him from so terrible a fate.

"And you came just in the nick of time. I want to thank you——"

"Oh! bother all that! This is what we call high fun out here. I'm never happier than when knocking over a few of them gray critters on the jump."

Cuthbert himself believed he would be of the same mind in the future, since those skulkers had given him a scare he was not apt to forget in years.

"You wonder who I am and how I happen to be camped here without horse or weapons, so let me explain," he hastened to say, interpreting the curious glance the other cast about the lone camp under the cottonwoods.

It was quickly told, and in such a frank, engaging manner, not sparing himself for his blunders, that the lad on the buckskin horse was quite taken with him.

He held out a hand impulsively, the same that had

worked the gun with such disastrous results to the snarling wolves.

“Right glad to know you; needn’t be ashamed of what happened. No man could have shown more bull pluck in facin’ the critters. Me? Oh, I’m only Karl, a range rider, off his beat, and”—here he grinned broadly—“lookin’ for trouble, as Old Sile says.”

It was a strange meeting, and one heavily charged with fateful issues. Ten minutes before neither knew of the other’s existence, yet now their life lines had crossed, and they were destined to endure much in common.

To Cuthbert it was a meeting fraught with momentous possibilities.

Strange as it may seem, this college lad had conceived an ardent desire to become a centaur of the plains, a cowboy, one of those dashing spirits whose wild life possessed a fascination for him which he could hardly understand, much less explain.

And in this wiry lad, whose home was in the saddle, and who was doubtless just as expert at sending a rope lasso through the air or taming a vicious broncho as he had shown himself to be with a gun, he saw his ideal.

But this was not the sole cause of Cuthbert Lee finding himself under a Dakota sky. There was another and a far more potent reason. Had Karl been able to peep into the Lee home way back in Virginia he would have found that this plucky youngster whose life he had saved was bound up in a mystery in the unraveling of which he was to witness many strange scenes and live through countless hardships.

Karl had meanwhile dismounted, and was picketing his horse after the custom of his kind.

Without warning, save a sudden shout, he sprang to one side and began to stamp and thresh around like one who had taken leave of his senses; but

Cuthbert was not puzzled to account for his actions since he saw that Karl slapped with his hat at little spouts of flame that had begun to flash up amid the clumps of prairie grass, where the last blazing ember thrown at the gaunt leader of the wolf horde had lodged.

Grasping the situation, the boy from the East joined Karl in his impromptu dance, and between the two the incipient conflagration was finally subdued.

"Phew!" gasped the range rider as victory finally perched upon their standard; "you came near starting a racket that would ha' played the very old Dickens."

"Would it have been very serious?" asked Cuthbert.

"Well, when you've seen one or two prairie fires I reckon you'll be careful how you open the ball. But then I forgot; you had your life at stake."

"It's a pretty good thing we stamped it out then."

"Yes, sirree; we jest caught the blaze in time—with this wind and dry grass it would have gone off with a roar. To tell the truth, I'm not too fond of such a thing myself—you see I lost all my hair and part of my hide in one a year or two back, and can't forget it."

He spoke as one with a fund of experience to draw upon, and Cuthbert being only a greenhorn, found himself lost in admiration of such a bold, and, in his mind, romantic character.

Not that any evidence of pomp or pride could be seen about Karl, who, while sturdy and self-possessed, appeared to be just what he was, a genuine, whole-souled, impulsive boy, able to accomplish quite a few things in keeping with his bold calling, yet liable to make mistakes which he would frankly own up to.

They sat down together by the fire, and Karl producing some food from the bag at his saddle, the

tenderfoot broke his fast. Of course they talked as boys will, and in an hour's time had exchanged confidences, so that they appeared to have known each other for years, such is the ingenuous nature of unsuspecting youth.

What Karl was induced to tell concerning his romantic life in the saddle, with its hardships and pleasures, seemed to quite enthrall the other, who began to see a chance of his dream coming true, when he too might scour the broad prairies in chase of buffalo and antelope, or join with other cowboys in the grand spring and fall round-up of cattle and horses, a genuine cow puncher and breaker of bronchos.

CHAPTER II.

CHASED BY A PRAIRIE FIRE.

Sitting there by the bright camp-fire, the boy from the East forgot his fatigue and the hazardous adventure through which he had recently come.

He listened like one charmed while Karl told in simple, though graphic language, what manner of life a prairie lad led, his rough experiences, his dangerous work when in the midst of a stampeding, fear-crazed herd of cattle, his lonely vigil when serving as night wrangler for the camp, watching the horses or mules while they fed, and defending them against the attacks of wild animals, or, it might be horse thieves with a red skin. How Cuthbert hung breathlessly upon every word! This was what he had long yearned to experience; and now that there seemed a fair chance of his being gradually introduced to the characters constituting the drama of ranch and range, the old enthusiasm leaped up anew.

In imagination he scoured the limitless prairie on the fleetest of bronchos, shied his trusty rope through the air, singling out his victim and bringing him down with unerring precision, fought the wild prairie fire, breasted the fierce blizzard in the effort to save the stunned and starving cattle—all these and more he had read about, and now had painted for him in plain but forcible language by one who, though but a stripling like himself, had passed through the checkered career of herdsman, wrangler and cowboy.

There were other events even less pleasant, of which Karl said little—of desperate battles with Indians on their periodical raids or encounters with

the "bad men" of the border, who bow to no law save force.

These things Karl kept in the background, believing the other would in due time have experiences of his own that would introduce him to such scenes.

Long they sat there.

How changed everything seemed, now that he had a staunch and true comrade at his side! The blackness of the night was less fearsome, the solitude had no terrors, and he could even listen to the distant, long-drawn, melancholy howl of the fierce prairie wolf without a single quiver.

At last Karl's eyes began to close in spite of himself.

"Guess I must be done up," he said with a laugh. "It's good to have somebody like you to talk to, but I've been riding since dawn and I reckon I'd go to sleep in the middle of my story if I started to tell you another."

"They'll keep, Karl," said Cuthbert. "I could listen to you all night, but I know you're pretty tired."

"That's what I am," responded Karl. "Let's turn in, then. Buckskin can bear us both in the morning; and trust him to run us up against the freighters' caravan on the——"

But Karl's tired eyelids slumbering fell, and stretching himself out at full length, he slept the sleep of the just.

There seemed no reason why Cuthbert should not drop into sleep as easily as his wearied companion, but somehow time drifted on, and while his eyes were shut his brain was busy with a thousand thoughts.

It was not the past so much as the future that engaged his mind, though there were a few things in his career that came up now and again to cause more or less anxiety.

What Karl had told him so graphically had in reality fired his imagination and killed the desire for sleep which his tired body demanded.

It must have been long after midnight.

Cuthbert sat up with more or less impatience because sleep refused him the sweet boon he craved.

He rubbed his hot eyes, and looked around.

The fire had gone out, and yet it was not dark as before.

This surprised him at first, but he quickly decided that the old battered moon must be rising. Had he stopped to reason a moment it must have struck him as a little incongruous that for once this steady, heavenly luminary had taken a notion to rise in the west.

The moaning of the wind had increased to a dull roar, and yet the cottonwoods did not appear to be lashing with its violence.

Karl's horse was stamping and whinnying at his tether.

"Seems to me," said Cuthbert, "there is something out of the ordinary in the general condition of things—the very atmosphere is lacking in the chill that this hour of the night always brings—or I'm dreaming."

He shook Karl, glad to have some one whose familiarity with the signs of the prairie would master the situation.

Apparently Karl had not yet entirely overcome the boyish propensity of deep-seated reluctance to leave the land of dreams.

"What is it?" he muttered, drowsily.

"The moon's risen, and I reckon we're going to have a storm," said Cuthbert.

Then Karl sat up.

Sleep was gone from his eyes in a twinkling. He heard the uneasy actions of his horse, caught the peculiar roaring, hollow sound away off to windward,

saw the yellow-red glow that was lighting up the heavens as no harvest moon ever could illuminate them, and with a snort of alarm sprang to his feet.

Cuthbert knew then and there some good cause for action had arisen, but he did not comprehend the whole terrible significance of the truth until his companion clasped his arm and half led, half dragged him to the edge of the motte facing the west.

Then he was simply appalled by the weird and uncanny spectacle that burst upon his view—the whole horizon as far as the sight could reach seemed to be on fire, and the strange, roaring sound he had listened to as the approach of a storm was a secret no longer.

“That’s the moon that rises in the west!” cried Karl, sarcastically.

“A prairie on fire!” gasped Cuthbert.

“Yes; ain’t it a grand and terrible sight? But this is no time for talk—we’ve got to do some tall riding right away if we want to have a chance to see daylight again. Come!”

How steadily he spoke in the face of a peril that threatened death! Cuthbert had admired him before, but now he felt something even stronger for the lad whose spirit could not be daunted by even such an impending calamity.

Karl gave his orders coolly, but quickly, for seconds were precious at such a time.

It seemed hardly a minute ere they were at the side of the snorting horse, Karl running the trailing lariat through his hands until he reached the frightened animal, Cuthbert coming just behind with the cowboy saddle and paraphernalia.

“Sorry for you, Buckskin, my boy, but there’s no escape. You’ve got to bear double this night, and let out every kink at that or we’re all goners for

sure. So, there, steady, boy. Look sharp, comrade—behind me—quick!”

Fortunately the Virginia lad was a fair horseman—at least he had been considered such in his old home, though when he saw cowboys ride he knew he had much to learn.

He scrambled up behind Karl, who had just coiled his rope on the saddle horn.

“Hold tight to me—we’re off!” shouted the latter.

The buckskin horse shot away like the wind, and apparently unconscious as yet of the fact that he so gallantly bore a double burden, fear gave him additional strength and that crackling roar in the rear served as no other goad would have done.

Surely Cuthbert was having a speedy introduction to the perils that menace the prairie traveler.

At least he had never experienced a ride that bore any comparison with that mad gallop.

It was with considerable difficulty he managed to maintain his seat, and he shuddered to think what the consequences must be should the horse break through into a gopher hole.

Only the sagacity of Buckskin stood between them and a catastrophe.

Karl maintained his coolness in the face of danger, a characteristic that becomes second nature with cowboys, constantly finding themselves in tight places.

He knew what course he had laid out and just how much of a chance they had of escaping from the fiery terror that boomed along in pursuit.

“I’d like to stop and look at it,” said Cuthbert, twisting his head around to see what the spectacle was like. There was a dreadful fascination about it he could not explain—the lurid heavens, the leaping flames, the clouds of smoke bearing myriads of fiery sparks which started miniature conflagrations in the

grass beyond, to be swallowed up in turn by the great avalanche of flame.

"Better not pull up," said Karl, grimly; "that is, if you want to live to tell the tale."

Buckskin was doing his noblest, and Karl had no need to use the stinging "quirt" that dangled from his left wrist—there is no lash equal to that of fear.

Still the fiery pursuer gained, for the wind had increased to more than ten miles an hour and was whipping up the flames unmercifully.

The heavy load crippled the horse, already hard used on the previous day.

What wild exhilaration in such a ride when life and death lie in the balance!

Cuthbert felt his nerves thrill with the tension—he seemed to have entered the arena of western life with a bound, and though his introduction had been almost savage, it at least promised to launch him upon the sea of experience without loss of time.

He could feel every muscular movement of the brave little broncho under him, and experienced that feeling of pride which comes to a true horseman when his steed strains every nerve to accomplish the race.

Buckskin was running for his life now.

The aspect in their rear became constantly more terrifying, the closer it drew.

Karl had not as yet said one word save to occasionally shout encouragement to his overworked horse, but even the tenderfoot knew he was aiming for some particular spot, to reach which meant safety.

To his mind the chances were rather in favor of disaster, yet somehow he had learned to place great confidence in the stanch buckskin horse and his able rider.

The novelty of the situation, together with his own fears, forced him to at length ask Karl what

they were aiming for; whereupon the other pointed to a dark line in the advance and declared it to be the river, which would, with its green trees and watery barrier, doubtless check the rush of the flames.

All they wanted was time enough to gain this oasis in the desert.

The heat had become almost unbearable, especially to Cuthbert, whose unprotected back caught it the most.

As they drew nearer the stream the horse seemed to exert himself still more, as though scenting the cool water, and the greenhorn began to have renewed hopes.

Still, it was a close call, and he never saw the time when he felt any desire to repeat the experience—the slightest mishap to Buckskin, and doom was certain.

“Bend low!” suddenly yelled Karl.

And it was lucky Cuthbert obeyed the command, for in another minute they were dashing in among the leafy branches of the trees bordering the river.

None too soon did this occur, for the flying sparks had already commenced to rain upon them, and the carousal of fire was apparently just at their heels.

How blessed the relief as Buckskin, with a shrill neigh, dashed into the cool waters!

Both boys threw themselves from his back and soused their heads under to emerge dripping with moisture, but relieved of the fever that had commenced to riot in their veins.

“That’s the first time in your life, Cuthbert, when you took a ducking thankfully,” said Karl, with a grin.

“Guess that’s right,” replied Cuthbert, as he made a feeble attempt to repeat Karl’s smile.

Standing there up to their waists in the cool

waters of the Powder River, they gazed upon the sublime spectacle presented when the on-sweeping prairie fire bucked up against this obstacle to its further progress, and Karl vouched for the fact that many a conflagration had this same old river turned back in the days that were gone.

The roar decreased in volume, the awful blaze began to die out, with here and there a dead tree flashing up like a gigantic torch.

But the fire had met its death and sullenly acquiesced in its destiny, since the breeze had failed to carry the sparks across the green belt marking the river's course.

All this the newcomer saw with wondering eyes, never to forget what danger lies in a careless spark upon the billowy plains at a certain time of year.

"Come," said Karl, at length, "we must ford the river while we can see. The other shore will give us a camp. For one, I haven't had enough sleep, and I kinder reckon poor old Buckskin feels like he could drop."

The cowboy always thinks of his horse, nor can this be wondered at when that animal means everything to him, even as the fleet steed of the desert does to the Arab or Bedouin.

So they cautiously made their way across, Karl on the watch against quicksands, for the river was notoriously treacherous in this regard.

Thanks to Karl's sagacity, they reached the opposite bank in safety, and not being very particular, threw themselves upon the ground to rest.

Presently, however, Karl thought best to make a fire at which they could dry their clothes after a fashion, for he remembered that his companion had never spent nights on the range tending cattle in the midst of tropical downpours, with only an old yellow "slicker" for protection, and slept comfort-

ably in a pool of water that oozed from his garments.

Before lying down, Karl went to see Buckskin, and Cuthbert could hear him talking affectionately to the weary horse, as he hobbled him where the grass was greenest.

This time Cuthbert slept despite the new excitement that had come upon them—tired Nature demanded repose, and even his heated brain had to give in.

When he awoke the sun was shining, Karl was busy at the fire making a limited breakfast as only a cowboy knows how, and the odor of fragrant coffee permeated the air.

Cuthbert was up in a jiffy.

"Hi there, Karl," he called out, gayly, "what can I do to help the good cause along?"

"Lots!" said Karl promptly, and he set his new chum to work.

The simple breakfast, eaten under such singular conditions, tasted fine, and Cuthbert's spirits arose to greater heights than before.

This was the free life for which he had so long yearned, and he felt sure he would enjoy being Karl's comrade.

Buckskin apparently did not like the idea of again bearing a double burden; perhaps it brought to his equine mind the startling events associated with his last experience in that line; but Karl had the master hand, and no broncho that lived could baffle his desire.

Accordingly they mounted and were off at a very moderate pace.

Karl had little doubt as to his ability to discover the freighters' caravan, which he knew must have crossed the river at the usual ford, and reaching this he showed his companion the deep ruts made by the wheels of the great wagons drawn by mule power.

After that it was easy, and about noon they came up with the caravan that had halted to rest their cattle for an hour or so.

Cuthbert was eager to learn whether his treacherous cayuse had, with the wonderful instinct of his kind, made the camp, and was delighted to learn that this was so.

He had promised Bob a good thrashing to pay for his miserable trick, but the animal greeted him with a glad whinny that quite disarmed his master.

Moreover, Cuthbert was now of the opinion that the fault was wholly his own; since meeting the young range rider he had learned more points in connection with bronchos than he had ever dreamed of in his philosophy, and chief of all, never to trust them wholly.

Preparations for leaving the caravan were soon completed. Karl was pleased to discover the small amount of goods he had to pack on Bob's unwilling back, for truth to tell, the prairie boy had been haunted by a terrible fear lest his new-found friend would produce a Saratoga trunk and stagger them about its transportation.

Many of the "mule skimmers" knew the cowboy, and greeted him with rough enthusiasm, so that evidently Karl was well liked among the teamsters of the freight trail.

He had a genial word or a joke for every one, and Cuthbert flattered himself that he had been fortunate indeed to make so warm a friend out of a character so universally commended.

A bite of lunch and they were off, just as the teamsters were shouting and swearing to get their refractory mules in motion.

Cuthbert, seated once more in his own saddle, instead of hanging upon a horse's withers, felt light-hearted enough to shout. His ambition, laughed at by Eastern college mates, was in a fair way of

being realized, the air seemed bracing and all Nature joyous. Soon he would see, and perhaps join in the many sports and labors of these wild "prairie skimmers," whose home is upon the back of a bucking broncho, and who welcome danger for the intoxication it brings to the nervous system.

How good it felt to handle his Winchester again, and what vows he made to utilize it upon every occasion whenever a gray wolf was concerned, for somehow the chivalrous spirit of his ancestors seemed to have been humbled in the dust by the affair of the lone camp, and he could never see one of those animals without an ardent desire to wipe out the insult.

Karl bore away toward the region where the ranch upon which he was employed was situated; they would have to do good time if they hoped to reach it by sundown.

But these prairie steeds are capable of covering an incredible number of miles within a limited time, and their course was as straight as the crow flies.

To a child of the prairie all signs are as plain print, and Cuthbert was as deeply interested in and lost in admiration of the marvelous manner in which Karl could tell in a twinkling just how long a time had elapsed since antelope made a trail the boys discovered, as Karl, on his part, was filled with awe and envy over the knowledge his young college friend showed of books and the wide world.

It began to appear as though fortune had brought them together in this strange manner in order that they might be useful to each other.

The acquaintance had begun under such peculiar and trying conditions that it had already passed the preliminary stage and was advancing with leaps and bounds to a closer relation that would make them chums.

Each discovered in the other certain elements to

arouse his admiration, and was eager to exchange what he knew for those things his heart had yearned after.

Cuthbert's cayuse proved to be in good trim, and the already half-fagged Buckskin was forced to do his prettiest in order to keep alongside during that sharp gallop; but the little fellow was made of stern stuff, and had proved his mettle on the previous night, so that he hung on with the pertinacity of a wolf in chase of its wounded quarry, and old hunters declare this to be the acme of doggedness.

The sun hung low in the west when Karl gave a shout that betokened satisfaction, and turning to Cuthbert, he exclaimed:

"There, my boy, how's that?"

"Why, what on earth are we up against?" said Cuthbert, gazing curiously ahead. "There's a rough looking one-story building and a heap of other odd-looking outhouses. I guess that's what they are."

Karl laughed.

"Keep on looking, Cuthbert, and you'll see jest what we've struck in about a minute."

Then Cuthbert detected moving figures, men on horseback and groups of cattle that were being rounded up for some purpose, perhaps shipment East in charge of trusty herders, to the nearest railroad.

Eagerly the tenderfoot strained his eyes while the panorama gradually unfolded more and more as the two riders swept on nearer the animated scene, and the declining sun sent his quivering red shafts over the erstwhile white fleecy clouds until the whole heavens seemed ablaze.

"By Jove, it must be a ranch!" exclaimed Cuthbert.

It was his first glimpse of a real, genuine cattle ranch, and naturally he took the keenest interest in everything connected with the whole affair.

In truth, the picture as seen by the light of the dying sun, was one long to be remembered—the whitewashed buildings, the boundless, flower-studded prairie, as yet unsullied with that latest triumph of civilization, the barbed wire fence; the lowing herds wending their way toward the corral, the circling cowboys who darted thither and yon, slapping with their hats now and then at refractory animals that showed a disposition to kick over the traces and wander off by themselves, and above all the glorious heavens, painted as no cunning hand of man could ever equal on canvas.

Yes, it was an introduction to Sunset Ranch which Cuthbert would long remember—it fulfilled his wildest dreams and opened to him a new life where the adventurous spirit within him could find such as was denied in the East.

As they came galloping up, loud voices greeted Karl in a hearty manner, and Cuthbert knew his young friend was "hail fellow well met," and a favorite with Kelly's herders.

He could not but notice the peculiar glances cast in his direction, and knew many a rough joke would be cracked among these free-souled riders over the advent of the tenderfoot with his tailor-made suit of corduroy; but all that could be endured, for Karl was his friend and Karl had assured him that in the main the cow punchers were a good-natured set; and besides, the Eastern lad was grimly determined to make himself at home as one of them from the start.

Now they were in the midst of the lowing herds, and rode up to the porch of the long, low house, where Mr. Kelly and his wife stood waiting with smiles to receive them.

And this, then, was the way the tenderfoot came to Sunset Ranch.

CHAPTER III.

WILD LIFE ON THE RANCH.

Many were the novel experiences in store for young Lee upon the great cattle ranch—never a day went by that he failed to learn some new trick connected with the wonderful prairie life.

Work there was in plenty, and be it said to his credit he did not shun it as many boys would have done; but there were also hours of recreation, made more enjoyable by the labor with which they had been preceded.

His soul, long cramped, cribbed and confined within the walls of college and metropolis, seemed to expand beneath this genial Dakota sky, and he even found a strange pleasure in standing watch over the horses when serving his time as Kelly's night wrangler.

The star-studded sky, the whispering winds, the perfume of flowers and the sense of solitude combined to make a grandeur that gave him satisfaction beyond expression.

And there was danger, too.

Wolves hovered around when he watched the sheep with their many tender lambs, and the utmost vigilance was required on the part of the herder to discover and slay these cunning wanderers.

By degrees he learned, under the guidance of Karl, how to detect any uneasiness among his keen-scented charges, and about where to look for trouble.

Probably the Virginia lad never in all his past life experienced more savage joy than came to him one night when watching a bunch of sheep that had been inclosed in a rope corral and left to his charge.

It was a clear night, and a young moon hung in the western sky, giving a tender light, just enough to see some little distance. The previous night it had rained and Cuthbert was soaked through when he came into camp, so that he felt in a mood to fully enjoy the delights of this occasion.

It was about this time he began to discover that the sheep showed signs of restlessness—the ewes with their young lambs crowded to leeward while the old rams sniffed the air, and pawed the soil in a defiant manner.

“There isn’t the faintest sign of a coming storm, and I bet the danger lies in some four-footed beast, hungry for spring lamb,” he concluded.

He kept as cool as was possible under the conditions, though conscious of the fact that his heart was beating like a trip-hammer; and remembering the explicit instructions given by Karl, began to creep to windward, as it was evident the alarm came from that quarter.

Eagerly he strained his eyes to detect any moving creature, and his Winchester was held in readiness for instant use.

There had been some pretty wild talk among the riders of the X bar X outfit, belonging to Kelly’s ranch, of Indians away from their reservations and driving off herds from the most isolated grazing quarters, which news was circulated through herders and cowboys belonging to other camps.

Hence, under such circumstances it was not singular that the tenderfoot, as yet unable to distinguish the difference in signs of danger, should let imagination run riot in his brain, and picture a gang of thieving Sioux creeping up to stampede his flock. This bare possibility was not a pleasant outlook, but the greenhorn was game all the way through, and did not flinch from the task set before him.

By degrees he worked to windward, keeping close to the rope corral. He had made almost half the circuit and as yet discovered nothing, but was not in the least disappointed, for the racket had increased inside the corral, the rams rattling their horns in defiance and snorting much as a deer whistles at sight of danger, while some of the frightened lambs uttered plaintive cries, as if recognizing the fact that it was their precious selves the intruder wanted.

Still further crept the herder; his eyes had become almost like those of a cat, and he was able to detect many things that might have escaped ordinary vision.

Then came victory—he detected a movement in the down-trodden grass, as though some crouching figure crawled stealthily along in the direction of the corral.

“Whether that dusky figure,” said Cuthbert under his breath, “is that of man or beast, I’m not going to attempt to decide; this isn’t the time to argue the point; but this infernal creeper threatens the safety of my charges, and incurs the penalty of his rashness.”

The boy made ready with his gun.

It was not a long shot, though the conditions made it anything but a sure one.

Whatever the crawler might be, man or beast, some suspicion of danger had arisen, for it no longer advanced, but crouched there.

Cuthbert discovered a pair of luminous eyes turned in his quarter, which reminded him forcibly of the yellow orbs that had surrounded his lone camp-fire when he was lost upon the prairie.

The recollection gave him new resolution.

He utilized the twin orbs as a target, and let fly without wincing a particle, as had been his wont in earlier days.

Then there was a commotion, indeed—he saw a long bodied animal skulk away and sent another bullet after him, though probably with but indifferent success.

When the herder ran forward he found a gaunt gray wolf kicking his last, proving how true had been his first shot.

A sense of exhilaration filled his young heart as he stood over his fierce quarry and noted the dimensions of the turned-down marauder.

This shot in the night seemed to wipe out much of the sting that had annoyed him ever since that other occasion when, but for the opportune arrival of the young range rider, he must have fared badly.

So experiences multiplied, and Cuthbert by degrees learned the first principles of a cattleman's success—to depend wholly upon his own resources in any emergency and never be at a loss what to do.

No wonder they are a self-reliant race, and make glorious fighters in war, such as the Rough Riders Wood and Roosevelt took to Santiago!

Karl was Cuthbert's model in everything.

Now, according to his own mind, Karl was far from perfection, making occasional mistakes which were frankly confessed; but Cuthbert believed him faultless so far as a knowledge of prairie love and cowboy life was concerned, and sighed for the day when his own clumsy manner of reaching results would give way to the finished nonchalance through which Karl attained the same end—what was an effort for him was perfectly natural to the prairie lad.

By degrees Cuthbert could ride a fairly active broncho, with only a "hackamore" about the beast's jaw in place of a bridle; he experienced that delight in conquering his first unruly and bucking steed that comes to the true horseman, and without which there could be no hope for him as a cowboy.

Then he diligently went to work with the rope,

and managed to master its intricacies, so that in due time he could throw it over his horse when he wanted a mount.

These things pleased him mightily—he was taking on a coat of tan under sun and wind, while his frame became more rugged with the life of exposure he led.

As yet Karl had not been wholly taken into his confidence, though the prairie boy began to suspect that it might be some other cause than mere love of adventure that brought Cuthbert Lee so far away from his Eastern home.

Some time in the near future, perhaps, when they sat together under the friendly stars and watched the great flock of sheep belonging to the famous Kelly ranch, Cuthbert might in a burst of confidence open his heart to him and relate the circumstances connected with his past.

Above all things, Cuthbert delighted to sit with the cowboys when the day's work was over, and hear them relate their amazing experiences with the legion of dangers that beset the prairie herdsman in those early times.

He learned how to separate the wheat from the chaff in these stirring yarns, and thus found a way to profit through the experience of others. In the days to come he would, on more than one occasion, be able to accomplish some difficult task through having had a solution propounded by one who had run up against the same difficulty and conquered it.

Thus time went by.

Cuthbert appeared to be one of the boys—his tailor-made corduroys had been supplemented with leather "chaps," he sported a wide felt hat just as saucily as the next one, and carried a quirt attached to his left wrist when driving cattle, the proud insignia of a cowboy. He had learned to hustle with the best of them, and few indeed among Kelly's men

but who liked the Virginia "kid" for his good nature.

Every day brought its duties, and he spent most of the time in the saddle, acquiring new experience, now riding down a skulking coyote or anon waylaying antelope and gaining a shot through the dexterous use of a red rag, which excited the curiosity of the little animals and drew them nearer the covert where Cuthbert and his Winchester were secreted.

There came a time, however, when the peace that reigned over Sunset Ranch became a thing of the past, and its place was taken by a new excitement.

It happened one morning that a rider from the Double Cross outfit down the river came galloping up, waving his arms and firing his gun in a manner characteristic of cowboys in general when on a lark or desirous of attracting attention.

Karl and his friend were just in the act of saddling up—each had taken his rope, thrown it over his horse and was engaged in "cinching" the girths (for the cunning animals have a way of distending their bellies as soon as they feel the saddle on their back, so that an unwary rider who might think he had tightened his girth would find the saddle slipping to one side as soon as he mounted) when the first distant shout called their attention to the fast on-coming horseman.

"Hello! here's trouble," said Karl, and apparently there was a little ring of satisfaction in his voice, while his clear gray eyes lighted up, as though the prospect of a break in the steady routine of everyday work, which had not the charm of novelty for him it possessed with young Lee, might not be so very distasteful.

"What's the matter—too much liquor and on the warpath?" asked the tenderfoot, who had seen some peculiar things among these rough and ready men

of the border and had learned to regret their weak points even while ardently admiring their many admirable qualities.

"I reckon it means danger," said Karl, quietly.

The other immediately ran the gamut of such perils as might threaten a prairie cattle ranch—cyclone, fire, an Indian foray, the presence of white outlaws or "bad men"—which of these could it be, he wondered?

Once mounted, the two boys galloped toward the house, near which all hands had begun to gather in anticipation of the courier's arrival.

"It's Old Sile," said Karl, as they rode.

Now Cuthbert had heard his friend speak so often of this sagacious and veteran rider of the cattle ranges that he felt a genuine thrill of pleasure at the prospect of meeting one who had led such a checkered career, and to whom all the cow punchers of the whole region looked up to as a man from whom the best of them might on occasions secure points.

The cowboy was a man well along in years, whose gaunt frame and iron jaws spoke of indomitable energy—otherwise he did not differ to any extent from the rest of the gang.

Cuthbert saw that he was a born leader, and possessed the confidence of the men, some of whom undoubtedly had been with him in wild forays of the past when the cattle stampeded in an electric storm, or the marauding Indians had to be pursued in order to rescue the stolen herds.

Yes, they knew Old Sile, and were ready to follow his lead anywhere.

Mr. Kelly hastened to meet him with some anxiety on his face, for he had more than one valuable bunch of cattle feeding on the range, which must excite the cupidity of prowling bands of dusky thieves.

"What's in the wind?" he asked—such men do

not waste words when unknown danger seems in the air.

"Indians off their reservation, and lookin' for trouble," grunted the newcomer, who, having ridden fast and far, was more or less winded.

"Squaws with them or not?" asked the ranchman—for when on a hunt the red man of the plains takes his family along, but never when going on the war-path or bent upon a cattle-stealing raid.

"Nary a squaw seen—all bucks and rigged out strictly for biz," came the reply.

At this, looks were exchanged among the employees of X bar X ranch; it meant a change of venue, that their work was evidently cut out for them, and that it would be of quite a different nature from the humdrum routine of the last few weeks.

Among such wild spirits it could only be expected that a prospect like this would arouse more or less enthusiasm.

A brush with the Indians meant danger, and that is what the cowboy enjoys above all things.

"Say, where'd ye meet 'em?" asked the ranchman.

"Down river," said Old Sile, laconically, with a nod of his head.

"Many?"

"Enough to wipe out Sunset. Heard as how these Sioux fellers was makin' trouble with the cowboys of Lone Star and Double Cross outfits."

"Ye did?"

"Yep; and they made toward the range. Guess they've an eye to scooting with some of the cattle quartered thar."

All was excitement in the camp, but presently order came out of chaos.

Kelly was a man of great presence of mind.

This was not the first time, by long odds, that in his experience as a ranchman he had been called

upon to outwit such wily and desperate marauders at their game of grab.

Buffaloes were still to be found by zealous hunters, and for one he did not mean that these thieving Sioux should lay in their winter stock of meat from his herd if prompt and energetic measures could prevent it.

He consulted a few minutes with Old Sile, and then gave his orders in a clear voice, naming the men and hustling them away upon the duty to which they were appointed.

Some were sent to look after a bunch of cattle known to be feeding at a certain point about eight miles away, with orders to drive them toward the ranch.

Another gang went to round up the troop of saddle horses, which might prove objects of interest in the eyes of the Indians.

Thus half a dozen parties shot out from the ranch and scoured the plain.

To Cuthbert's intense pleasure, Old Sile voluntarily attached himself to the little group among which Karl and himself were numbered. It may have been mere accident that caused him to do so, though his attachment for Karl was well known—perhaps the presence of two "kids" in this allotment caused him to think he could sort of balance matters by casting his lot with them.

Cuthbert had difficulty in realizing that he was already upon the warpath, adjudged capable of bearing arms in a desperate affair of this kind when the cattle had to be rounded up and swept in toward the ranch, perhaps with the hostile Indians bearing down upon them.

His blood seemed surcharged with fire, and leaped through his veins like molten lava—it was far different to his former experiences, which had been wholly confined to fur, fin and feather. Now he was to be

pitted against wily human beings, those red men of whom he had heard so much and seen so little.

Still, some of the enthusiasm that marked the cowboy band had taken possession of him, and he was quite as ready to plunge into the affair as the most dare-devil among the lot.

So they galloped on in the early morning.

Cuthbert tried to remember all Karl had told him about the Sioux.

Few could give more points than the young range rider—he had spent many moons among the tepees of the Sioux, had wrestled with the Indian lads, beaten them at rifle practice, won races on horseback and lost them, too, and had even gone on their annual hunt in search of meat to be dried into pemmican for winter use.

Old Sile had said the band originally numbered some sixty young bucks, though, no doubt, it had been ere now broken into many fractions, the better to drive off cattle and confuse the herders.

Hence they might expect to encounter only one of these smaller bands, but even then the probability was the marauders would outnumber them three to one.

Cuthbert watched the old ranger almost constantly—every move of the veteran had a deep significance to his wondering eyes.

And yet it might be set down as assured that what Sile did not know about prairie lore was hardly worth acquiring.

He was the leather stocking of the cattle range, and it would, in truth, require the skill and pen of a Fennimore Cooper to do his quaint character full justice.

Cuthbert was only an amateur at reading human nature, but even he could readily see the strength there was back of those piercing eyes, so like the unflinching orbs of the eagle, that dare look even into

the glowing sun, and as his acquaintance with old Sile deepened he discovered new traits to admire—that the plainsman who had laughed the Indians to scorn as he stood at the torture post, with a bravado equal to the most reckless among them, or engage in a single-handed fight with a grizzly bear, his only weapon a hunting-knife, could at the same time be as tender as a woman with a wounded companion.

They were but five in all, Old Sile, the two kids and a couple of range riders who knew their business from A to Z, hardy fellows, good natured, reckless, and of course with the almost universal love for strong drink that marks their kind.

Taken altogether, they presented quite a determined and warlike appearance, and the tenderfoot believed it would be a sorry day for the painted marauders should they come in contact with them. He had had no experience with Sioux on the rampage, and did not know what deviltry they were capable of showing.

The gallop continued mile after mile.

Eager eyes scanned the surrounding prairie whenever the horses topped a rise, but if the Indians were near by they managed to conceal their whereabouts without trouble, for no one caught even a glimpse of them in any quarter.

Then Old Sile gave a sudden signal for the careering squad to halt, and was overboard immediately, bending over the trail his keen eyes, ever on the alert for "sign."

Crouching down on all fours he began his examination. At intervals was heard a grunt, and finally he delivered himself with the air of a man who knows not doubt:

"Ten Indians. Heading for spot northeast of camp. Why in thund'ration did Kelly send the cattle thar?"

Karl tried to explain that they had been "sent there for safety."

Old Sile scarcely heard, or if he did he took no notice—only continued in the same certain tone:

"Fellers passed here two hours ago. Humph! Indian pony ridden by a girl—white girl—by gum, a prisoner!"

This was spoken with utter confidence by the veteran and accepted as gospel by the men, which made Cuthbert stare in wonder.

By what wizard legerdemain he discovered these facts Cuthbert could not even guess, but he knew something of the wonderful skill shown by such plainmen in reading "sign;" and the deductions aroused by a bent twig, a footprint in the prairie mold or shred of dress goods caught upon a cactus thorn would give points to even Conan Doyle's famous character, Sherlock Holmes.

Perhaps the Sioux had raided a freighter's camp, or overwhelmed some daring pilgrim who had, with his family, set out unguarded to reach the new mines of the Black Hills.

Karl and Cuthbert were the only ones who took the least interest in the matter, for the others were figuring solely upon the chances of victory in case they fell in with the cattle thieves, and whether their thatch or scalp would, as a result, adorn the tepee of a Sioux brave.

They must speedily know the worst, for they were rapidly rounding up to that portion of the range known to be used by the big bunch of cattle that Kelly had handed over to their attention.

Karl, who knew something about such matters, attempted to coach his friend as they madly rode along side by side, but it was unusually hard work talking under such circumstances, and, after all, much must be left to the sagacity and intelligence

of each individual going to make up the whole party.

“One more rise and then we’ll know,” said Karl, as he drew his gun, and took a fresh seat in his saddle, as if to be in readiness for anything that might come.

Cuthbert held his breath as the little party fairly flew up the incline; when his eyes looked over the crest and the level, grassy plain beyond, he saw a spectacle well calculated to stir the blood in his veins and overwhelm him with the fever of battle, for those they sought were upon the stage of action.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INDIAN FORAY.

Even before our little party had gained the top of the rise their hearing gave plain warning that something unusual was going on beyond, for a confusion of sounds came, borne on the faint zephyr—the bellowing of cattle, shrill neighing of excited horses and shouts that were unmistakably human.

So those who had had previous experience in these matters were not very much surprised at the scene that burst upon their vision.

There were the cattle dashing this way and that, as though about to stampede, while anon could be seen a figure on horseback, with waving arms, endeavoring to collect the herd so that it could be driven off.

Even at that distance they could readily be distinguished as Sioux braves.

Cuthbert glued his eyes on them eagerly.

He had seen a few tame Indians at the border town from whence the freighters' caravan started, and some more of the same sort at the frontier fort, but this was really his first glimpse of the red-man of the wild and woolly West engaged in his dangerous game of running off cattle.

The sight did not possess the same fascination for the rest of the crowd—they only experienced deep indignation and anger because these red thieves of the border had pounced upon their pet herd and were intent upon driving off the choicest animals, to slay them later and call their meat buffalo pemmican.

Old Sile gave a peculiar laugh, as dry and rat-

ting as a lot of bones shaken in a box, or the crackling of dead leaves in the forest.

"Thar they be, the beauties, and neck deep in the game. We'll have to spile their reckoning, I kinder guess. Now, then, let loose, and when you shoot let lead count."

The rush down the slight incline and across the intervening stretch of level prairie, would Cuthbert ever forget it?—such exhilaration, with his blood at fever heat, such a sensation of going into action the first time—every young soldier has experienced it.

At first the marauders did not notice their sudden advent on the scene, so taken up were they with their engaging business, and the breeze, what little there was, coming from the wrong quarter.

The little cavalcade cleared some distance ere a fierce yell declared the fact of their discovery.

"Sit tight, Cuthbert," shouted Karl. "The beggars are on to us at last."

Cuthbert's blood was up, and the rush across the plain had given him a superabundance of courage.

"Say, Karl, watch them fly in about a minute."

"Well, hardly," said Karl, with a peculiar smile. "My boy, we'll have some tough work before they clear off."

"But they won't stand up to us. Why, they'll turn tail directly we get in their range."

"What! and leave the chance to bag cattle? Not on your life."

If the tenderfoot expected to see the Sioux braves scamper off in alarm, without making an effort to hold what they had seized he was very much mistaken.

These impetuous young bucks were just pining for action of some sort, and welcomed the opportunity to have a little brush with those they reckoned their hereditary foes.

At the same time previous acquaintance with cowboys had taught them caution—they knew how reckless these wild range riders might be, and how proficient with rope and revolver.

Evidently the red rascals had arranged a plan in anticipation of such an interruption, for while a couple endeavored to cut off a fair-sized bunch of cattle with which they meant to ride off, the other eight galloped toward the advancing horsemen.

Such a spectacle as they presented, the boy from the East had never before seen—some shook their fists in bravado, others waved guns over their heads, while all of them sat their horses as though a part of the animals.

With many-colored feathers glowing in the sunlight, and the war paint upon their faces giving each warrior a hideous aspect, they truly presented an appearance that was apt to send a thrill of alarm through the breast of the stoutest adversary.

Still Old Sile never slackened his pace, but kept straight on, as though he meant to teach these audacious young bucks a lesson they would not soon forget, and Cuthbert, seeing the grim look upon the seamed and weather-beaten face of the veteran cow puncher, made up his mind there was nothing to fear.

They kept well together as they rode, and had now arrived within easy gunshot of their galloping adversaries.

“Do the Indians mean to keep straight on until the shock of battle comes?” Cuthbert asked, now thoroughly alarmed.

Little as the tenderfoot knew about their habits, he did not think this could be the usual method of warfare employed by such tricky and cautious people.

“You just watch,” said Karl, significantly.

Even as he contemplated such a change in the

programme it came about—the careering marauders divided into two lines and began to draw apart as though about to circle around them.

It was an ancient trick, but fully as effective as in the days when the forty-niners were crossing the plains, exposed to the attacks of the prowling redmen.

Old Sile laughed again, and there was a ring of scorn in his peculiar cachination, as though he gloried in an opportunity to pay off old scores, for he had in years gone by suffered much loss at the hands of just such thieves as these.

As Cuthbert looked, guessing what was coming next, he suddenly saw each bronze rider throw himself out of sight behind the body of his galloping pony, only a glimpse of his painted face being caught under the animal's neck.

Then came a puff of smoke and the spiteful report of a gun.

The bullet went over their heads, which was not to be wondered at, considering how difficult it must have been to shoot at all under such peculiar conditions.

Cuthbert had never in all his life been under fire before, and somehow he found himself involuntarily ducking his head, though not one of the others moved a muscle, which fact gave him a feeling of humiliation.

By this time the Indians were riding around them on all sides, for Old Sile had drawn in his horse, knowing what must be done to beat the rascals on their own ground.

“Company halt!” he sang out.

Cuthbert drew frantically at his bridle and brought his horse on his haunches.

He was eagerly watching to see what the others did, wishing to be in the same boat, and when they

leaped to the ground the boy from Virginia was not a whit behind.

The bullets were singing overhead and all around. Cuthbert could not but compare them to an enraged swarm of bees seeking the youthful destroyer of their peace—he had, like most boys, passed through this warm experience during visits to the country, and the impression made under such conditions remains a lifetime.

He was surprised to find himself so calm, and began to entertain a better opinion of his abilities than heretofore.

Just as he expected, no sooner had his comrades touched ground than they sought shelter behind their horses.

It was a thrilling moment with those wild riders circling around, drawing closer to fire their guns and then galloping off to reload.

Old Sile did not mean to remain there long to serve as a target for these marksmen—it was true that as yet they had done no damage, but a random bullet might presently cripple one of the horses forming the barricade.

He spoke a few quick words to Karl, who immediately turned to Cuthbert on the other side:

“Let me have your rifle—it’s the only one in the crowd, and those skip-jacks manage to keep outside pistol shot. Watch how surprised they’ll be when Old Sile opens on ’em.”

They surely were, not having expected to be so warmly received.

The man who had been with Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack and Wild Bill Hickok on many a stirring trail had not forgotten how to handle a rifle with good results, even though he had little use for such a weapon in his business as cow puncher.

His first shot tumbled over a horse, and the sur-

"His first shot tumbled over a horse." See page 50.





prised rider, scrambling out from under, crawled away through the grass in the greatest imaginable haste.

Immediately a savage shout went up from the other cattle thieves, and Cuthbert imagined they were about to charge headlong, but it seemed they had too much discretion for that, and began to draw off.

Old Sile, having gotten his hand in, and taken quite a fancy to the new gun, thought he might as well keep the ball going, so he selected another victim and brought the poor pony down with apparent ease, so that there was another badly-demoralized Sioux brave plunging through the grass in the effort to escape possible doom.

“Youngster, this is a good 'un,” said the veteran.

Cuthbert's Winchester had certainly won honors enough for one day, and the boy was proud of being the possessor of so reliable a shooting-iron—besides, Old Sile had put the stamp of approval on it and this was enough for him.

This second disaster quite completed the discomfiture of the young bucks, who, giving up their attack as a bad job, turned tail and galloped off.

Our friends immediately sprang into their saddles and started in hot pursuit, for the Indians must be driven entirely off if the prize cattle were to be saved.

The two red herders had kept an anxious eye upon the trend of events even while they endeavored to urge their bunch of cattle to the west, frightening them with shouts and waving arms; and when they saw their erstwhile valorous comrades in full retreat with the squad of cowboys bearing in their quarter as fast as horseflesh could carry them, a sudden remembrance of an engagement elsewhere

caused them to give up the herding business and flee madly over the plains.

The game was well won.

All that remained now was to gather the scattered cattle in a bunch and head them in the direction of the ranch, where they could be guarded until the marauders had left the country.

This might appear a gigantic task in the eyes of a greenhorn, but to experienced cowboys and herders it presented no great difficulties.

Soon their familiar shouts rang over the prairie, and the horses darted hither and thither, rounding up the cattle that had been scattered, "milling" them by degrees until they were in one compact, bellowing herd.

The Indians had quite vanished from view, having evidently come to the wise conclusion that there might be other cattle far easier to run off than those bearing the X bar X brand, and which were guarded by so determined a posse of cowboys.

"How about that girl Old Sile told us was with the Indians?" said Cuthbert. "Was that a mistake?"

"You don't know Old Sile," said Karl, simply.

"Well, where on earth is she? We saw no sign of her among the cattle thieves."

"Guess she's around somewhere," said Karl. "Like as not they've tied her to a tree until such time as they picked out their beef."

"You're sure there is a captive girl?"

"What Old Sile says I'd swear by. But, here, if you want to get on the track of that girl we might try that clump of cottonwoods. What say?"

"Right. Let's lose no time."

Soon they entered among the trees with considerable curiosity, and Karl had even another motive in looking keenly about, for he could not forget the two cattle thieves who had been dismounted as a

result of Old Sile's marksmanship, and suspected they might have headed in this direction for cover.

Here they found the girl, sure enough, proving the old range hustler a clever prophet, indeed—she was standing beside a tree, to which Cuthbert saw she had been secured.

The chivalry of Virginia was aroused by the spectacle, and, jumping from his horse, he ran eagerly up to liberate her.

She was clad in homespun, evidently some settler's child, and quite winning in appearance.

Karl had not moved—he sat in his saddle, holding his gun in one hand, as though expecting to use it—thanks to his knowledge of Indian habits, he would never trust one of them more than was necessary.

And Cuthbert soon had cause to bless his comrade's foresight, since at the very moment he was cutting the deerskin thongs that bound the slip of a girl to the tree a sinewy pair of arms were thrown about him, pinioning his own fast to his sides, while a painted, exultant face stretched around to look into his eyes.

The second Sioux had made for Karl, hoping no doubt to overwhelm the other "kid" as easily as Cuthbert had been made secure.

He reckoned without his host, however, for Karl, without the slightest hesitation, shot him in the shoulder, and, having quite enough of the game by this time, the young brave ran off with one helpless arm at his side.

It was easy enough to intimidate the other fellow, who, watching his chance darted behind a tree and dodged off.

None of them had any desire to remain longer among the trees, and, as the girl eagerly declared her willingness to accompany them, they set off.

Cuthbert's horse being the larger and stronger, she was mounted on him, though Buckskin had ere

now, as we have seen, proved his ability to carry double in an emergency.

The cowboys had already started the cattle in the direction of Kelly's ranch, and unless new and unexpected difficulties arose they seemed in a fair way to bring up all right.

Of course there was no chance to talk with the girl during the ride, and Cuthbert was forced to restrain his curiosity until such time as she could tell her story.

He felt sure Kelly's good wife would look well after the waif, and see that she lacked for nothing.

So they finally neared the home ranch.

It was about noon.

Other herds had meanwhile been driven in, and, surrounded with rope corrals, made the air tremulous with their bellowing.

It looked like a round-up, for there were other cattle than those belonging to the X bar X brand present, and cowboys belonging to other outfits circled the big bunch.

Loud huzzahs greeted the appearance of Old Sile with the prize lot intact—the foray of the young bucks had been a lamentable failure in this section at least, and the cowboys had done some little execution with their guns that might deter a second raid.

The rescued girl was received warmly by the ranchman's good wife, and taken at once into the house to rest after her strange experience.

She smiled her thanks to the boys, and both of them voted her a charming little thing, for whom they would be willing to do much more than had fallen to their lot, should the occasion ever arise.

Later on they heard how she came to fall into the hands of the Sioux—it was a story not strange to the border in those days.

In company with her uncle, who was expecting

to have some connection with the new coal mines recently opened, she had been making the journey when their horses fell lame and they dropped behind the rest of the freighters' wagon train.

It was while camped on the prairie the red raiders came into camp.

The white man, realizing the folly of resistance when his enemies were two-score against one, endeavored to make friends with the hot-headed, young warriors, but they treated him with scant courtesy, forced Polly to mount behind one of their number and galloped away.

A few remained behind, and the poor girl had reason to fear the worst when she heard the quick detonation of guns in that quarter ere they had gone half a mile.

Since that time she had ridden with her captors. They treated her kindly enough, and one among them, the same fellow whom Karl had wounded in the arm, announced his intention of making an Indian girl out of her by staining her face and dyeing her golden hair—though those laughing blue eyes must have always betrayed her to be of other than Indian blood.

They saw no more of the Sioux raiders, but heard of great damage caused by the red thieves farther south, where they ran off cattle, killed several herders and made more or less work for the soldiers sent from the post in search of them.

It would always remain a vivid recollection in Cuthbert's mind.

Besides, there was Polly.

Mrs. Kelly, kind, motherly soul, had adopted the waif, for there was pretty good evidence that the man she called her uncle had met his fate on that night his camp was invaded.

Old Sile led a party in that direction. They discovered the wrecked and looted wagon, and the

bones of the ill-starred horses which, tethered and helpless, had been devoured by wolves and coyotes. They also found evidence that some wretched human being had also met his doom in a similar manner, and their bitterness toward the untutored savage increased to the day of reckoning when the debt might be settled.

Life on the ranch soon drifted back into the channel it had occupied previous to the advent of the bronzed raiders.

Karl never wearied of teaching the companion a strange fate had sent to him the varied duties appertaining to this wonderful life on the prairies.

They occasionally had a day off, when, with the faithful Winchester and Karl's gun as a good second, they scoured plain and coulee for such big game as might not be deemed unworthy the notice of such ambitious Nimrods.

Thus the boy who, previous to his Western trip, had never bagged anything larger than duck or rabbit, perhaps with a Canada wild goose or a Virginia red fox to top the pile, now found antelope, wolves, coyotes, and even a bear falling before his gun.

The last-named gave the boys about as severe a shake-up as any one ever experienced and came out alive—indeed, Karl was caught unawares and, as a last resort, had to take to a tree just as Cuthbert had done.

Unfortunately, neither of them was armed, Karl's revolver being with his belt, hanging on a tree in camp, while the Virginian had dropped the Winchester in his mad haste to clamber beyond the reach of the bear, at which he had hastily fired on sight ere Karl's warning shout could restrain him.

A wounded bear is usually an ugly customer, particularly when he belongs to the cinnamon species.

There they were, lodged in two trees with a savage and determined foe beneath.

Cuthbert was dismayed.

Not so his friend—perhaps he had never gone through with this experience before, but others had, and he could profit by their recital of how they outwitted Bruin.

Accordingly Karl suggested that the other make a fish-line out of some cord, fasten a fork cut from the tree to one end and angle for the gun, while he pretended to descend and kept the attention of the shaggy monster.

All of which Cuthbert entered into with a zest that came of newly-awakened hope and ambition.

It was quite a tedious job, and failure stared them in the face, when a last lucky effort served to fasten the wooden fork in the guard of the trigger.

After that it was very simple, and old Bruin paid the debt of nature; but he was a stubborn chap, and it took all of six bullets, planted where they were apt to do the most good, to bring him to time.

There was something to admire in his sturdy defiance, refusing to cut and run even after receiving such painful wounds, and Cuthbert was really glad when the scene came to its inevitable conclusion.

Polly proved a little angel of the ranch, and never a man but who would have laid down his life for her. The sound of her sweet voice raised in song was like the rippling of a cheery brook gurgling over moss-covered stones in the cool shades of the forest, and more than one hardened case bit his tongue to repress the rough oath he had been about to utter.

The boys she looked upon in the light of brothers—to them she felt she owed her escape from the bad Indians, and in many ways was she enabled to show the deep gratitude that lodged within her gentle little breast.

Thus the summer waned.

Cuthbert appeared to be happy and contented. The life, wild and full of movement as it was, seemed to agree with him, for he no longer looked in the least delicate as a result of overstudy in college.

As yet he had not spoken of his past, that is beyond casual mention of the sports in which as a lad he had indulged.

Perhaps there was something unpleasant which he did not relish confiding even to Karl, and thus kept putting off the evil day.

Karl never gave it much thought—it was quite enough for him to know he had found a congenial friend, such as he had longed to possess, and if the proud Virginia lad came from a family whose immediate ancestors had been hung as pirates it mattered nothing.

Although the grand spring round-up had been over at the time Cuthbert came to Sunset Ranch, he was from time to time given opportunities to assist in minor affairs, such as during the summer Indian scare, and when they shipped cattle to the nearest railway station.

Thus he learned all about rope-throwing, could use a “snubbing post” almost as well as the next one, and rode a vicious broncho in a manner that even elicited warm praise from old cow punchers.

So autumn found them.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE SIOUX CAMP.

The disagreeable features of range life now began to manifest themselves. Cuthbert had experienced them to a small extent from time to time, but there were so many pleasant days sandwiched in between that he was able to take the bad philosophically with the good.

Now came rainy nights when he was wet through, despite the yellow oilskin "sou'wester" known as a "slicker" on the plains, when he would ride into camp of mornings driving the saddle band of horses, and would be stiff with cold, and so exhausted that after a cup of hot coffee he threw himself upon the ground in his tent and slept like a log while his clothes dried on him.

Through it all he preserved much of the good nature that seemed a part of his being.

Karl, who had been toughened by long years of exposure, watched these things with no little concern.

He finally decided that the erstwhile tenderfoot had all the requirements to make a first-class cowboy in due process of time—a little more hardening, with a blizzard or two thrown in, would teach him all there was to be known in the business, though improvement was always possible.

Old Sile came up occasionally to see the youngsters, in whom he seemed to be especially interested, and Cuthbert grew quite fond of the quaint herder.

He had long since discovered that Silas Gregg had been a soldier in his father's regiment during those dark days when hostile armies struggled and fought upon poor Virginia's sacred soil, and this fact

seemed to be a bond between them which drew their hearts together.

Polly was blooming out into a perfect prairie rose, sunny-faced, cheery and a blessing to the old ranchman's wife.

The boys dearly loved to have her with them on a gallop, and were proud when she took Cuthbert's rifle and proved her accomplishments as a true Western girl by incontinently bowling over a skulking coyote that had been hovering around in the hope of securing a young and tender late lamb from the sheepfold.

Those were halcyon days indeed.

No shadow of the trials which the future held in store for them crossed the boys' trail.

Cuthbert had seen an Indian village on the move, and learned many facts in connection with these strange people.

The old medicine man aroused his keenest curiosity, and he examined with interest the odd implements of his weird calling—the dried gourds into which small stones had been introduced to make a furious rattling when shaken, the rattlesnake fangs forming a necklace, the hideous mask which the old humbug donned when endeavoring to drive away the evil spirit possessing a sick Indian by his incantations and herbs, and many other kindred articles that possessed a reverence in the eyes of the simple Sioux, but excited his secret levity.

Then there was great sport horse racing, the Indians believing they possessed the finest animals on earth, for modesty is unknown to their craft.

So the boys determined to take them down a peg or two, and laid plans accordingly. One young buck, a son of the leading chief, Afraid-of-His-Horses, was especially loud in taunting the pale-face lads, and particularly Karl, about the superior breed of animals owned by the Sioux, and their

proficiency in riding—the white boys were not in it when the pace was hot and furious, however much they might appear at home when chasing horned cattle.

Thus it came about that a challenge resulted.

“See here,” said Karl one day, “this Indian kid’s got a grudge against me. That right?”

“I think that’s evident,” said Cuthbert, with a smile.

“I wonder why.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out one day that Little Buckshot, this big chief’s arrogant son, is in reality the painted cattle thief who carried Polly off.”

“I kind of thought so,” said Karl.

“No wonder he don’t love you. A bullet in a fellow’s shoulder isn’t the way to gain his affections.”

They both laughed over the episode.

“And didn’t you see the kid in camp once or twice?” went on Cuthbert.

“Yes, like as not I did—but not to notice,” said Karl.

“Bah! Why Little Buckshot has several times made some excuse to ride up to the ranch, dressed in all the pomp and style of the Indian dandy—and I begin to think there is no more conceited fool on earth—evidently in the hope of making an impression upon Polly. I guess he must have cherished a secret admiration for her.”

“Phew! You don’t say!” exclaimed Karl.

“Yes, it’s all straight. Take my word for it, Karl, the chap who carried off Polly and wanted to make her an Indian girl, and the fellow in war paint that got a bullet of yours in his shoulder, and the Little Buckshot that’s going to make sport of your horse racing—they’re all one and the same.”

“Humph! Going to make sport of old Buckskin! No, sirree! Not if I knows it. I’m burning to see him do it. That’s all.”

Arrangements were speedily made for the great event, and Karl's popularity among the cow punchers brought scores of the boys around on the day the race was to come off.

Bets were freely made.

An Indian takes little interest in a horse race unless he has staked something on it.

Karl was therefore compelled to put up his pony against the one his competitor meant to ride.

He knew he had a big task ahead, for Little Buckshot meant to leave no stone unturned in order to accomplish his defeat, for it was expected that the Kellys and Polly would view the race in company with the head men of the tribe and some visiting Eastern sportsmen in search of buffalo, then rapidly disappearing from the great Western plains.

Karl knew the good points of Buckskin, and had no fears as to the result, secretly believing there was not a horse in the country that could outrun his reliable mount when he was in the saddle and the conditions favorable.

The day came.

It was a time of great excitement among the dusky sons of the prairie.

The cowboys enjoyed the fun, too, and circulated among the tepees making bantering wagers and jollying their copper-colored friends in a way peculiar to their class.

Fortunately there was no trader on hand with his kegs of fire-water, so that the chances of clash between the two races was slender; such things have occurred at times, with grievous results on both sides.

The scene was very exhilarating at the time Karl and his chum rode up.

All preliminaries for the race had been arranged and the course had been laid out.

It was patterned somewhat after the regular cus-

tom of civilization, a number of circuits of a triangular course measuring a mile around.

Usually Indian races had been straight away, but by degrees they were coming to recognize the sterling advantages of the other course, where the start and conclusion would be under observation, and any trickery that might be attempted discovered.

Little Buckshot certainly had hunted up a magnificent animal, that was the envy of every cow puncher present.

Cuthbert began to lose a little of the sturdy confidence that had up to this hour dominated his whole being.

Not so Karl.

The prairie lad had grimly made up his mind to win that race, and he felt that with true sympathy between horse and rider, Buckskin could not be beaten.

Besides, Polly was an inspiration. Polly, whose bright eyes so full of mischief and dancing with good health, shot him encouragement as he galloped past the "grand stand."

The Indians had scattered all along the line of the race course, the better to encourage their representative, the chief's pet son.

Here and there a sombrero announced the presence of a cowboy, bent upon seeing fair play; for these hustlers of the prairie had a very poor opinion of an Indian's honesty, and they feared lest some trick might be attempted should the closing heat of the race show Karl in the lead.

The terms had been carefully repeated to both contestants by the august old chief, and at last the critical moment arrived when the word was to be given.

Intense excitement reigned everywhere, and the whole Sioux village was afield to see this most in-

teresting sport, in which an Indian naturally takes the keenest delight.

"Ready?" cried the chief.

"Yes, yes," shouted the impatient cowboys, anxious to see the start.

"Go!" came the command.

"Thar they go," yelled the crowd of cowboys. "Give it to him, Karl. Buckskin's goin' to swipe the prize. Go home, you red fool!"

"O-he-o!" followed the shriek of the Indians.

The two young competitors shot forward like twin arrows from the same bow—side by side they crossed the line amid the thunderous shouts of the spectators, in which the shrill cries of the Indians could be heard above the hoarser yells of the cowboys.

Karl, whose life had been almost spent in the saddle, knew full well that in a game of this sort, coolness and watchfulness meant half the battle.

He knew the wonderful power possessed by his horse to make an unrivaled spurt, and felt certain that if he could hold the Indian up to the last stretch the race was his beyond any question.

It seemed as though the other were in no hurry to bring out the latent qualities in his noble steed, for during the first mile lap the two rivals galloped side by side.

The pace was hot enough to satisfy those who looked on, but the experienced easily detected the fact that as yet neither horse had by long odds been put to his best paces.

Karl, looking across toward his lithe competitor, could see a dusky face turned in his direction, a face that was lighted by a savage smile, and then he knew positively that Little Buckshot was the marauding young buck whom he had wounded in the timber, for the mask being thrown aside, he saw him as he was.

Then the dusky rider plied his whip, and his horse shot forward like a hawk darting upon its quarry.

One touch of Karl's quirt and Buckskin was holding his own, his nose just behind the big gray's rump.

Such shrieks and yells as arose all along the line—it was like pandemonium broke loose; but Karl paid no attention to the derisive execrations of the excited Indians or the encouraging shouts of his cowboy adherents—all he saw was that figure on the big gray just ahead and the mocking sneer on Little Buckshot's face whenever the latter turned to look back in the hope that he had shaken his persistent pursuer off.

A third stretch opened.

The Indian had started to belabor his mount as only one of his kind, acting under stress of excitement can, and the animal was really doing his best.

By this time the pace was terrific, and delighted spectators of all shades; though deep anxiety made itself manifest on many faces as they watched the two boy rivals go thundering past, for heavy wagers depended on the final result.

Karl knew his hand was on the prize.

He still held Buckskin close behind the big gray, and as yet had had no occasion to call upon that wonderful reserve—it was a card he held up his sleeve.

To beat the Indian was not enough—he desired to snatch victory away from him just when the other felt sure of winning.

This required good judgment on his part, since a mistake might ruin all.

The last quarter was taken up.

Now they passed the first stake of the triangle and made the sharp turn without a change—when the second had been reached and the gap between had

widened a trifle, the Indian, seeing the home stretch in front, thought he had surely won.

He could not refrain from waving his hand exultantly to his friends and giving vent to a yell of satisfaction.

There is an old saying to the effect that an Indian should never shout until he is in the woods, nor a white man until out of them.

So Little Buckshot counted without his host.

Karl knew the crisis was upon him.

It was win or lose.

All depended upon the yellow nag.

The cowboy's best friend needed no plying of the stinging quirt's lash—Karl and he were well acquainted, and Buckskin knew what was required of him when the rider bent low in the saddle and chirruped in his ear.

Magnificently he responded.

Foot by foot he overtook the big gray.

Now they raced side by side and the goal just ahead—the young buck was frantically plying his whip, shrieking in anger and digging his moccasined heels into the steaming side of his noble steed.

Alas! the big gray was at his limit.

“Now, Buckskin, my beauty, show 'em what you can do,” whispered Karl, and Buckskin responded nobly, shooting ahead and crossing the line so far in advance that there was a plain streak of daylight between the rival horses.

Evidently there could be no dispute as to the result of that race.

A roar of applause greeted Karl's victory, and the cowboys thought it incumbent upon them to give a volley or two from their guns into the air.

The Indians took their defeat philosophically, as was their wont—all but Little Buckshot, who scowled the hatred that filled his soul.

Karl might have felt sorry for him, realizing the

awful bitterness of such a defeat in the presence of his friends, but the memory of what this hot-headed young buck had done when the cattle raid was on prevented him from wasting any sympathy in that quarter.

He knew Indian nature too well to attempt any move looking toward reconciliation, which he was sure would be spurned by the hot-head.

Leading his steaming horse he went straight to where Kelly and his party laughed and joked with the disappointed old chief and dejected headmen of the tribe.

Evidently the charms of the medicine man had failed to bring about the desired result—the old humbug had been a conspicuous figure among the spectators during the race, garbed after a manner to arouse the enthusiasm of a Bowery urchin, but after the Indian's signal defeat he mysteriously vanished from the scene, having gone, no doubt, to perform some more mystic rites and discover why the gods had made so great a blunder.

Polly's words of congratulation made Karl feel as though he had in part avenged the indignity of her kidnapping—although when he came to consider the matter closely, he could not see why he should hold a grudge against the other on that account, since he would probably never have known Polly had the young braves remained quietly on their reservation instead of getting the fever to run off cattle.

Mr. Kelly whispered a warning.

"Keep an eye out for trouble—that fellow is not taking his defeat the right way, Karl. Mark my words, you'll see more of him yet," was the way he put it.

Others among the experienced cow punchers were of the same opinion, and some openly declared Karl would have to fight for it yet.

He did not seem worried, whereat Cuthbert wondered—it was far from pleasant to feel that an Indian of some influence among the hot-headed younger element hated him with such intense bitterness.

Whether the old warriors knew of their participation in the raid or not could not be told, but doubtless they winked at the indiscretion, feeling that young blood could not be wholly restrained, and accepted the stores of pemmican brought in as buffalo meat with philosophical indifference.

The brand of the cattle had disappeared when the hide was buried under the prairie turf, and no one could claim his own.

Karl led his prize back to the ranch.

The big gray was a fine animal—true, he had been only half broken by his former Indian owner, and the boy's first duty was to put him through his paces, introducing him to the various phases in a cowboy's career.

Cuthbert was uneasy for a time, and scrutinized every clump of sage brush or cactus that lay near their line of travel—he had an idea that the Indians, humiliated in the great race, would live only for revenge, and, having the cowboy's general poor opinion of the aborigines, he feared lest Little Buckshot might lie in wait behind some such cover to make Karl his target, after the bushwhacker style in vogue among the Tennessee mountains during the Civil War.

As the days passed by, and their duties called for attention, nothing occurred to cause alarm, and Cuthbert gradually let the matter pass out of his mind.

The Indians had moved on—they were really upon their annual grand hunt, for as long as buffalo could be found upon the range this great event was religiously observed.

The time was near at hand, however, when it would be but a memory, for the great droves that once blackened the prairie for miles during their migration north and south had been decimated until now they were only found in small herds, eagerly hunted alike by red and white, even foreigners coming over and engaging guides like "Buffalo Bill" Cody to give them a last chance ere the bison utterly vanished.

It can be readily understood how the Virginia lad, having graduated in the class of wolf and antelope shooting, now that he had actually bagged a big cinnamon bear—albeit it was a pot shot from a tree that did the business—should aspire to engage in a genuine buffalo hunt.

Years hence he felt it would be with pride one might recall having been instrumental in bringing down such big game.

Karl was equally eager, though he had been concerned in such a chase many times, but that magic gun of the tenderfoot had especial charms for him, as Winchester repeaters were at the time something of a novelty in that region. He wanted to have a whack with it among the buffalo, to see whether it was quite as capable of tumbling a mighty bull to the earth as the old-time rifle.

The autumn was pretty well along before there came the desired opportunity. Already they had experienced a cold snap, and could expect a blizzard any day that would give the herders mountains of trouble endeavoring to save the cattle.

Karl came in one day with the news that he had discovered a small herd of buffalo that somehow had lingered longer in the north than their fellows, and thus far escaped the hunting parties of Indians scouring the prairie in a round-up for winter meat.

Cuthbert was delighted.

All necessary arrangements were made, and per-

mission obtained from the genial ranch-owner for a day off, in the expectation of both sport and profit, for the anticipated supply of buffalo meat was not to be scorned.

Cuthbert had some difficulty in getting to sleep, for his nerves tingled with excitement—this was a treat he had long promised himself, and now that his hopes seemed in a fair way of being fulfilled, he could not get the subject out of his mind.

In imagination he went through the whole business, just as experienced Karl had rehearsed for him, and even gloried in seeing a shock-headed bull bite the dust in response to his skill as a marksman.

Then some one roughly shook him—he had an idea it was Little Buckshot claiming the trophy of the chase.

“It’s time!” said a voice.

Cuthbert sat up and rubbed his eyes, astonished to find it all a dream, and that he was in the home shack, with Karl pulling at his sleeve.

The buffalo bull was a myth, and Little Buckshot only conspicuous by his absence.

He jumped up, ready to follow wherever Karl chose to lead, and determined to make at least the first part of his dream a reality.

It was dark as Egypt outside.

The stars glimmered overhead, and the air was frosty and keen.

Karl had some coffee ready, and both boys took a snack ere starting out upon the hunt.

The temperature had no terrors for such hardy range riders—in truth, it made the blood circulate, and did them good.

A third animal was taken along as a pack horse, upon the back of which they meant to convey any meat secured, back to the ranch.

One of the men was moving as they passed out.

He could easily guess their errand, and his "so-long" had in it all the cheery elements of good wishes for luck to be with them.

Karl was perfectly at home on the prairie by day or night—the stars were his guide, and should these fail, he always had his little compass to depend upon—besides, there were various other methods of locating the cardinal points known to those who risk their lives on the boundless, swelling plains.

Straight on he rode, mile after mile, with Cuthbert galloping alongside and the gray trailing behind, now skirting a treacherous gopher village, anon avoiding a coulee that lay across their track.

They talked as they rode leisurely on, since Karl had taken time by the forelock and started early enough, so there was no haste.

Dawn was at hand.

There is no prettier sight than the breaking of day as seen upon the prairies, where the level horizon seems so very distant. The gray line in the east widened and turned to a pale yellow, and presently the sun arose, heralded by glowing red streamers that, according to old plainsmen, as well as mariners of the sea, promised storm ere long.

Before sunup the boys had entered the belt of timber beyond which the herd of bison was supposed to be feeding in fancied security.

Perhaps the tufted grass was sweeter in the lee of the wooded section—some such cause had operated to detain them in their migration to the warmer south land.

The three horses were led now, and finally secured to trees, while the young hunters sought the fringe of the timber, in order to ascertain whether theirs had been a fools' errand or not.

Cuthbert's heart was jumping nervously as they reached a point from which an observation could

be taken, and looked over the open ground beyond, and then a sense of satisfaction such as only a born hunter may feel swept over him, for a score of dark, shaggy animals which he knew to be buffalo, came within range of his eager vision.

CHAPTER VI.

A DAKOTA BLIZZARD.

Apparently their presence was as yet unknown to the buffaloes, for they appeared to be feeding—Karl had made sure that the wind was right ere advancing to the edge of the timber.

At sight of the big game, Cuthbert felt all the eager symptoms that stamp a true hunter—he yearned to be crawling up among them or, mounted on his fleet horse, pursuing them in headlong fashion over the prairie.

Karl was the one to decide upon their course of action, and his will was to be as despotic as that of Cæsar, from which there could be no appeal.

So the young Virginia lad restrained his impatience and waited for the word.

Meanwhile he watched the bison.

To his mind they seemed contented enough with their surroundings, but Karl detected an uneasiness that aroused his curiosity, since he was sure it could not spring from their presence near by.

“There’s something they don’t just exactly fancy around about—a wolf, likely enough, but I see no calf to be in danger,” and Karl shook his head in a puzzled way, as though the situation might be too much for him.

“What is that object yonder crawling through the grass?” asked his companion in a whisper, as he pointed in a certain direction.

“Mr. Wolf, on your life, but I declare I don’t remember ever seeing one that crawled so clumsy. There he goes up to that cow standing alone—if he tackles her I’ll be more than surprised. Look yonder, what in all creation does that mean?”

There was little need of urging Cuthbert to look, since his eyes were glued upon the big gray wolf that had shambled along unsteadily until close up to the buffalo cow.

Then up rose the wolf on his hind legs, and seemed to go through some manœuvre as though pawing the air.

Karl uttered a low ejaculation, as a sharp "twang" came to their ears, borne by the breeze.

At the same time the gray wolf dropped again upon all fours.

The bison had ceased feeding and trotted heavily toward the remainder of the herd.

There was an unsteadiness in her gait that Karl's quick eye detected.

"Watch her drop!" he whispered.

Sure enough, the big beast seemed overcome with weariness before reaching her companions, she staggered, sank to her knees, and then rolled over in a way that was peculiar, to say the least—twice she essayed to rise again, but, unequal to the effort, finally lay still.

"Dead," said Karl, positively.

"What?" gasped Cuthbert, wondering what it all meant, and if he were under a spell.

"Watch the gay old deceiver, Mr. Wolf," was what the cowboy said.

There was a distinct shade of bitterness in his tone, which aroused Cuthbert's curiosity still more, until it affected his nerves, and he was actually trembling with eagerness to discover the explanation of these strange things.

Nevertheless, he fastened his eyes on the beast of prey, as though the wolf might after all prove the key of the whole puzzle.

The wolf was repeating his remarkable actions, creeping up toward a bull that in feeding had left the balance of the herd.

Again did the wolf rise up, again came that vibrating "twang" like the snapping of a violin string, and, inside of a few minutes, that bull had also dropped to the earth.

Cuthbert clutched his companion's arm.

"Tell me what it means—there is surely magic in it somewhere?" he whispered.

"Not at all—only a miserable Sioux brave," said Karl, bitterly.

Cuthbert had an inspiration.

"The seeming wolf——" he gasped.

"That skin hides an Indian—that's how a redskin brings down buffalo; and he must be a dandy with bow and arrow, for I can count seven dead ones from here."

"A bow—then that snap was the bow-string when he let fly?"

"Jest so, and now he's after another—see how he crawls through the grass."

"But surely he has enough now with eight on the ground."

"That's where you're all off. If he could kill a thousand he'd do it for the tongues alone, and let the rest go. No, you can gamble that unless something happens every one in the herd will fall, and there are 'bout thirteen left now."

Cuthbert's heart sank.

"Can't we do something?" he suggested.

"There may be no need; they begin to grow uneasy even now, and I think he'll only get one or two more before they break away."

"Shall we get our horses and be ready for a chase?"

Karl looked steadily around as if to decide upon the course the animals would take when once they started off.

"Yes, some. I reckon we'll be in the hunt yet, but keep an eye out for the red thieves. They may

believe we started the game, and be mad enough to bother us."

When the horses had been secured, the two young Nimrods turned and went south a short distance, after which they again made their way to the edge of the timber.

There they arrived just in time to witness the stampede of the buffalo.

Doubtless, suspicion had become certainty with the old war-scarred bull in charge of the herd, and giving the alarm, he went plunging off over the prairie, followed by the rest, at a course that would presently bring them past our hunters.

Thus there was a brief time for them to wait.

Cuthbert involuntarily looked to where he had last seen the mock wolf, and was just in time to discover the red marksman spring erect and throw aside the skin that had served him so well.

Then, with loud yells, out of the timber came a trio of Sioux braves, mounted on wiry ponies and leading the animal of their comrade.

They only made a sorry pretense of chasing the tumbling, tossing herd, and Karl's experienced eye saw at once that their ponies were utterly worn out with a long night ride, which doubtless accounted for their adoption of the old-time wolf project.

"The game is in our hands—we must ride a few miles before we open the ball. Now, mount and away," was what he said.

They vaulted into the saddle; one touch of the quirt and the horses bounded out from the timber upon the open.

Already the alarmed and demoralized buffalo had commenced to string by, so that the best they could do would be to fall in behind and stick close to them until the time came to use firearms.

As they galloped along they plainly heard a chorus of angry yells borne on the wind, and could easily

determine that the quartette of Indians had witnessed their appearance with a consuming rage, doubtless under the belief that, but for their presence, the entire herd might have fallen into their hands as prizes.

For the time Cuthbert forgot all about these disappointed braves; the excitement attending the chase was enough to hold his attention.

Often had he read vivid descriptions of just such a scene, and it was hard to realize that he was experiencing its joys now.

Karl did not urge his broncho.

A few miles more or less between themselves and that ugly quartette of red hunters would not come amiss.

Destiny brings these rivals together many times in the chase, and tragedies have followed.

At the proper time a little burst of speed would place them alongside, and in a position to give a good account of themselves.

Several times Karl turned in the saddle and looked back. Doubtless even his cautious soul was finally satisfied, for he gave the word that meant the closing scene in the hunt was about to occur.

When Cuthbert found himself riding alongside a bull with a massive head, he had considerable difficulty in getting his gun aimed, for it takes much practice to shoot with certainty on horseback when careering over the prairie at full speed.

Thus his first and second shots appeared to only wound the great bison, and the next thing he knew his horse had shied just in time to avoid the cruel black horns of the bull, that had charged with his head down.

The old fellow evidently believed in turning the tables, for he organized an immediate chase.

It was exciting enough, to be sure; but, somehow,

Cuthbert did not enjoy being hunted quite so much as when he was doing the chasing.

To use his gun now was impossible, since all his attention must be taken up with his frightened horse.

The old bull kept up the chase with a determination that did him credit, but Karl had sung out some directions as well as he could for laughing, and, by degrees, Cuthbert circled around so as to cross the path of his companion, who speedily accomplished the job wherein the tenderfoot had failed, by placing a bullet where it would do the most good.

When next Cuthbert selected a victim, he was careful that it should be a youngster, and in this instance he managed matters so well that Karl shouted his approval.

Since the cowboy had also secured a third victim in a cow, they had reached the limit previously set to mark their necessities, and the chase was accordingly abandoned.

The last they saw of the buffalo herd was a cloud of dust to southward, showing that their natural instinct turned them away from the land where blizzards would soon lock rivers, mountains and prairie in a prison of ice and snow.

Now Cuthbert had new lessons to learn in removing the hide and securing such portions of the meat as could be used.

He was no laggard, and had already become fairly proficient in this hunter's accomplishment with regard to smaller game, so that a little more experience increased his store of knowledge.

It took time to do it all; indeed, hours crept by ere the meat was secured within the hides, made into packages and securely fastened to the big gray, utilized as a packhorse for this one special occasion.

Frequently Karl had raised his head to sweep the prairie with his eyes, and particularly in the quarter whence they had come, for well he knew that some-

where in that direction the four angry Sioux braves still aired their grievance while they packed meat.

"See here, Cuthbert," he said, at last. "We've like as not said good-by to them red fellers, but there's worse going to happen."

"All right; I'm ready for the next item on the programme," said Cuthbert, lightly, for, now that the Indians were out of sight, he was inclined to laugh at the episode.

"Say, haven't you noticed that it's been getting colder?" asked Karl, and there was a look in his face that made Cuthbert serious at once.

The atmosphere had, indeed, suddenly changed, and it was several degrees colder than at sunrise; indeed, while the boys were working they several times mechanically paused to slap their arms vigorously about to induce circulation and restore warmth to their benumbed digits.

To Karl, brought up amid the dangers of the great prairie, there was a significance in this drop of the temperature that it would be folly to overlook.

"Sure's you're born, we're in for a blizzard," he said, emphatically.

That word had no particular terror for Cuthbert as yet—he thought he knew what a storm meant, but after he had passed through one experience of this sort, it would have a new significance, and the very mention of the word must ever cause an icy chill to chase up and down his spinal column.

According to the cowboy's reckoning, the conditions were all favorable for such a catastrophe, though it was as yet early in the season for so grim a visitant.

To his credit be it said, Karl's worry of mind was mostly in connection with the cattle out upon the range—they must suffer more or less, though the

early date gave him reason to hope they might not be subjected to a severe trial.

Just as they cinched the load upon the spirited gray, and were ready to jump into the saddle, the first snowflakes came sailing down from the dull gray sky, a small circumstance in itself, but one that gave the prairie boy much uneasiness.

When one of these Western storms starts in, it means business from the word go—they have the same “hustle” that pervades everything typical of the wide horizon.

In two minutes the air was full of snow, and when twice that time had elapsed they were enveloped in a white blanket.

With the snow came the keen wind, gaining force as it sped across the level plain, unloosed from the lair of the Northern Ice King.

Ugh! how it penetrated, despite warm garments.

Cuthbert was experiencing a revelation—he had never before known what a keen-edged blizzard breath felt like, nor could he honestly say he was at all charmed with the sample.

As usual, Karl kept his wits about him, ready to observe whatever was going on and take advantage of opportunities as they chanced to arise.

“We got to run for it,” he cried; “home lies ’most in the teeth of the blizzard, and we’d be fools to try to make Sunset Ranch till the storm shuts down.”

Shelter, then, was what they sought.

His knowledge of the country would be of considerable benefit to them.

The wind was apt to shift, so that it could not be depended on for guidance. Karl kept his compass where he could see it, though with the blinding snow and the appalling gloom that had fallen over the scene it was only by means of a determined effort he could make out which way the finger pointed.

Already sage brush, scattered here and there, together with cacti, resembled little hillocks, with the snow piled up against them, such of it as was not in circulation, for so wild was the howling wind that the air seemed to be one mass of flying particles of ice that lashed the face most pitilessly, and cut like needles.

Their progress was dreadfully slow.

Indeed, the horses could not have gone at all against the blizzard, and with it on one side suffered severely enough.

Cuthbert's mind involuntarily went back to the time when he had galloped over perhaps this same ground, pursued by the flashing, leaping fire—quite a startling contrast when compared with his present experiences, and he could hardly say which of the two evils was the greater, save that the present one always looms up more hugely.

The minutes dragged into hours—they seemed ages to the boys, who were perilously near the point of perishing.

“Say, couldn't we stop for a minute or two, just to let the blood get back into our veins?” suggested Cuthbert.

“Do you know what it would mean?”

“Great risk, I suppose.”

“More.”

“What then?”

“Death. Our only hope is to push on or strike some brush.”

Both boys rode on in silence.

Karl could hardly see his compass to make sure of their line of flight, and his fingers were too much like lumps of ice to do duty in the way of feeling; but he had a firm conviction they were on the right road, and that the timber must surely show up soon.

If, by any ill luck, he had made a mistake, it was apt to prove fatal to them.

He said nothing of this, but continued to cheer his companion, whose spirits had begun to droop under the terrific strain.

There was no sign of a break; these storms often last three days, and have been known to hold out five or six.

The only wonder is that any living thing in the way of animal life survives their fury.

Cuthbert was almost benumbed; he could only with the greatest difficulty maintain his seat in the saddle, and was rapidly reaching that dangerous condition when it would really become a matter of utter indifference to him whether they found shelter or not.

It was, therefore, just in time that timber hove in sight. To the boys it promised an asylum—safety, warmth, life.

Even the utterly-fagged horses knew the end of their trial was close at hand, for they seemed to push forward with renewed zeal.

Cuthbert made an effort and aroused himself from the half-stupor into which he had fallen.

So, with a shout of joy, they pushed on and presently found refuge under the trees.

Here, while the cold was still severe, the backbone of that piercing wind was broken, and when the boys crawled stiffly from the saddles, to which they had actually been frozen tight, they managed, by means of rough-and-tumble exercise, in which each pummeled the other most vigorously, to induce a new circulation of blood that began to give internal warmth.

“Cæsar! How it wars!” said Cuthbert, as he glanced up at the lowering clouds and heard behind the furious blasts of the blizzard.

“Tain’t much!” said Karl, nonchalantly. “I’ve been through much worse; but this ain’t no time to get spoutin’. Comfortable, Cuthbert?”

"You bet," said Cuthbert, and he nodded significantly out to where the storm still raged.

"Guess we might start a fire a-going," suggested Karl.

"Why, sure," said Cuthbert; "that's just the thing."

And, springing up, the two boys scoured the immediate timber for fallen limbs.

Suddenly Cuthbert called out:

"Hi, Karl, here's a find!"

Karl rushed to his side.

"Gee whittaker!" he yelled. "We're playing in luck. Now, jest who flung up this old log cabin here, I wonder?"

It was in fairly decent condition, and while the door had fallen from its leather hinges, that mattered little, as the opening was toward the south. It was a godsend to the boys, and they proceeded to make themselves at home.

"Say, I remember!" suddenly exclaimed Karl. "A lone trapper owned this shanty. The feller used to store beaver pelts and some other skins, and I reckon he's dead now. Any old way, we're here an' he's not, and that's all there's to it."

"Them's my sentiments," quoth Cuthbert.

It was a most wonderful freak of fortune that they should have run across this old cabin—one chance in a thousand, and all the more acceptable on that account.

At once they took possession, and presently had a cheery blaze started on the hearth that still bore the blackend embers of what was possibly the poor old trapper's last fire.

How good it felt! New life seemed to come with the reaction, and while Cuthbert kept accumulating wood, Karl carried in the packages of buffalo meat, and then secured the horses at the leeward side of

the house, where they might get some advantage from its shelter.

Their fright over, the boys could now afford to joke about the weary march, but Cuthbert was not so wholly recovered that he did not shiver when an extra loud and piercing blast shook the tall cottonwoods.

Still, dangers past often assume a more or less humorous aspect, especially in the eyes of buoyant youth, and it was not very long before the two castaways were laughing hilariously over the figure Cuthbert presented riding for dear life with a wounded bison at his heels.

"Say, Karl, do you know what I feel like?" asked Cuthbert, after staring dreamily into the glowing logs.

"Well, I don't know jest what you feel like, but you don't look over and above anything but a kid anybody had oughter envy."

Cuthbert laughed.

"Well, Karl, I feel more like a shriveled up mummy than a boy just now."

"And what's a mummy?" inquired Karl.

"What! never saw a mummy?"

"Not to know," said Karl.

Cuthbert almost screamed with laughter.

"Why, old chap, a mummy is a man that lived thousands of years ago, and whose body's still kept in a kind of coffin."

"Say, what are you giving us?" demanded Karl.

"Oh, here's something I must tell you, Karl," and Cuthbert launched into a disquisition upon the wonderful depositories of the dead Pharaohs.

"S'pose them fellers you've been talking 'bout didn't eat buffalo!" said Karl suddenly.

"Buffalo!" exclaimed Cuthbert.

"Sure! Fried buffalo."

"I guess they didn't. That is something that I haven't sampled yet myself."

Karl made a dive for one of the packages of buffalo and it was soon being broiled in a primitive way over the red embers.

"Now, what d'ye think of buffalo?" said Karl, as, a little later, he watched Cuthbert making deep incisions, with evident relish, into a luscious morsel he had cut off with his knife.

"Say, Karl, this is the finest bit of steak I've ever eaten."

"I thought so."

"And so tender! Why, I thought the thing would be like leather."

"You'll learn," said Karl, with a wise shake of his head.

"I think I've learned already," said Cuthbert, laughing. "Got any more of this?"

"Yes; but we may want it."

"Why, you don't think the blizzard is going to last?"

"For days, mebbe," said Karl, decidedly.

Cuthbert looked aghast.

"But don't let that worry you," continued Karl. "What's the matter with the log cabin?"

"It's all right; but I'd rather be at the ranch."

"Course you would; but you've got to stay right to here till the storm blows itself out. We've got enough to last us fer a day or two, and the horses can get feed among the trees."

"Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to make ourselves as comfortable as possible in the circumstances," said Karl, resignedly.

The day wore on.

As Karl had expected, the early storm was not likely to be as severe in regard to the length of its stay as others that might be expected later.

Already there were signs of its breaking, though

it would probably hold on by fits and starts until another day.

The wind still blew, but had lost much of its piercing vigor, though, when they went to the edge of the timber the vast expanse of prairie was just as thoroughly blotted out as when they struggled along with the chances of escape or death about evenly divided.

Gratitude surged through both their hearts as they realized what they had escaped, and they went back to the old cabin more thankful than they could find words to express.

How cheerful it seemed there in contrast with what lay beyond! Karl wondered if any herders they knew would not be able to catch their cattle and find safety in the timber; for every winter more than a few herders were lost on the range, frozen sometimes within three hundred feet of a cabin, which could not be seen in the blinding, maddening, freezing whirl of fine snow.

It was getting on well toward evening, and the two boys began to cast wistful glances in the direction of the buffalo meat, for such healthy appetites require a tremendous amount of feeding.

Cuthbert had stepped out to melt some snow in his mouth, feeling thirsty, when he came hastily back with a look on his face that told of new excitement.

"Ah! there, what's up?" asked Karl, seeing him take his rifle and make for the door again.

"A wolf hanging around—I heard him howl," was the answer Cuthbert flung back.

"Be careful—there are two-legged wolves in this section, you know," laughed Karl.

Then, struck by a sudden thought, he followed his companion to the edge of the prairie.

"Hark!" said the tenderfoot, eagerly.

Borne on the wind came a sound that was not un-

like the howl of a wolf, but no sooner had Karl heard it than he became strangely excited.

“Drop your gun and follow me,” he exclaimed, plunging into the snow, and then calling back over his shoulder: “Because that’s a cry fer help from some poor wretch lost out yonder in the freeze!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE GRAND ROUND-UP.

All that was noble and manly in the young Virginian awakened into life when he heard his companion thus declare that a human life was in peril out yonder in the whirling, sifting snow that was borne on the pitiless wind of the Arctic blizzard.

His own painful experience had been so very recent that he could fully sympathize with the feelings of any one confronted by such a dismal outlook.

At Karl's suggestion, then, he dropped the rifle where he could easily find it again, and plunged into the storm, intent only upon saving a human life.

The chances were decidedly in favor of the lost and imperiled one being an Indian, but, to the credit of the boys, be it said that neither of them gave a second of time to considering whether or not it were worth risking their own precious lives for a miserable red man.

Both of them were in prime fettle now to do battle with the shrinking blizzard.

The long rest beside a warm fire, together with a generous meal, had put new life and vigor into the erstwhile half-frozen and almost despairing lads, so that they buffeted the shrieking blast without difficulty.

Karl had located the cry for help, and kept his bearings as only a prairie-born lad might under such confusing conditions.

Straight as a die he pushed his way out upon the prairie until he believed they must be very close to the spot whence had sprung that involuntary, hopeless cry, such as despair wrings from a lost soul.

Cuthbert floundered to his side.

Now that the bitter edge was taken from the wind, and its fierceness diminished, the snow found a chance to settle in drifts, and this made it hard traveling.

"Listen, while I give a whoop!" shouted Karl, following his words by a lusty cry that might have been heard quite a distance around.

There was no answer, save the mocking laughter of the keen north wind.

Could Karl have made a mistake, or had the unfortunate whose cry reached their ears already succumbed to the exposure?

Karl believed the latter must be the case.

When a second still more vigorous shout of encouragement failed to meet with any response, he directed his companion to move about in short circuits in order to see whether any discovery would follow.

At first there was no result.

Karl was possessed of an astonishing amount of insistence, and would never give up a project so long as the slightest hope remained, and, consequently, kept up the search, gradually changing his base.

It was Karl who stumbled over some object covered with snow, and which he instantly discovered to be a human being.

His cheery hail brought Cuthbert to his side, and between them they raised the almost stiff form of an Indian brave, and staggered along with the burden in the direction of the timber.

Such sturdy lads were capable of exerting considerable strength under such an inspiration as saving human life must always be, but when they finally drew up at the old cabin, even they were nearly exhausted.

As the light of the still glowing fire fell upon the features of the half-frozen Indian, Karl started, then rubbed his eyes.

"Say, that's the little chap who thought he'd lick Buckskin."

"It looks like Little Buckshot all right," assented Cuthbert.

"Looks like!" repeated Karl. "That's the feller, on your new saddle!"

"Well, he'll thank us for this, no matter about whether he hates you or not. Hello, Karl, what are you going to do!"

"Never mind, only fill your hands full of snow."

Cuthbert looked mildly astonished.

"Hadn't you better put Little Buckshot up near the fire?" he suggested.

"What! do you want to kill him outright, if he ain't dead already?" shouted Karl, with scorn in his voice. "Here, you do as I tell you and ask no questions. I've seen many fellers lie down in the snow and beg to be let 'sleep in peace,' and I guess I had ought to know what to do in a case of this kind."

He began rubbing the young Indian with snow to take out the frost, and set Cuthbert to work chafing his limbs, so as to induce circulation.

As a last resort Karl even pummeled him as if he were kneading bread.

If a spark of life remained in Mr. Lo's poor body it was bound to be fanned into a lively flame under such vigorous treatment.

Success rewarded their efforts.

By degrees the exhausted Indian boy—for he was hardly more, though proud to call himself a brave—came back to life.

In less than half an hour he sat up, and soon after was on his feet, slapping his arms, and in others ways causing the warm blood to tingle in his extremities.

Meanwhile, once more the odor of cooking buffalo meat permeated the old wreck of a cabin, which had probably been the scene of many a similar feast in days of yore.

Cuthbert went out to get his rifle and see how the storm fared.

This time he heard the howls of wolves in the timber beyond a peradventure, and found the three horses very uneasy, so that he had reason to believe it would be necessary to keep guard all through the night, lest the ferocious beasts make an assault on their mounts and leave them afoot far from the ranch.

When he entered the cabin, Little Buckshot was gorging himself with the tender and juicy meat which Karl spread before him in such liberal quantities.

Doubtless never before in all his life had hot food tasted so good.

The others were soon satisfied, and watched his remarkable exploit with wondering and admiring eyes, for the capacity of a cold and hungry Indian is beyond belief.

It was heaping coals of fire on his head that this white boy, whom he hated because the other's superior qualities as a rider had humiliated him in the presence of his people, should be the one to snatch him from death.

An Indian is far from demonstrative, and Cuthbert was anxious to know how he would act.

The dinner, no doubt, made Little Buckshot feel remarkably good, as it does every human being.

He walked gravely up to the two white lads and shook each of them by the hand—Cuthbert thought he looked as sober as though attending a funeral in the bosom of his tribe. Then he spoke:

“Brothers, Little Buckshot no forget. You save um life; me come back sometime, mebbe. How?”

Cuthbert managed to gather from this remarkable speech that the young buck acknowledged his debt and hoped some day to repay it.

Meanwhile all rancor had been swept from his

heart—he would treat them as brothers, and risk his life, if need be, to return the favor.

An Indian never forgets good or evil, in which he differs materially from his superior white cousin.

The night had fallen.

It still stormed, though the wind had seen its best, and the fall of feathery flakes grew hourly less heavy.

But for the cabin being so very small, Karl would have brought the nags inside, in order to make them more comfortable.

As a next resort, he and Little Buckshot, who was pleased to temporarily don Cuthbert's heavy jacket while at work outside, made a rough shelter of fallen branches that would serve in lieu of a lean-to for the horses.

They, too, had heard the hungry wolves close to camp—doubtless scenting the store of fresh buffalo meat—and were of the opinion that only by means of a strict vigil could the horses be saved.

It was far from a pleasant task, but Western lads become early accustomed to the rigors of camp life, and Cuthbert proved an apt pupil.

There were occasions when the wolves seemed on the point of making a rush upon the tethered horses, and it became necessary to bowl over the most importunate in order to intimidate the rest.

Thus night passed away.

Ere morning dawned the stars shone out, proving that the storm was over. Being an early visitor, it had not the staying qualities that marked those of midwinter.

Little Buckshot had, in his own queer way, told them the story of his adventure. It did not differ much from their own experience, only that it had been so prolonged as to reach the dread climax from which they rescued him.

Early during the storm the little party had been

scattered, one being lost here and another there, until the chief's son found himself alone with his laden horse.

Through the hours he pushed on, fighting against the frost, until his exhausted pony dropped in his tracks.

Little Buckshot believed he was near timber, and had tried to make it, but the effort was too much for him, and he sank in the drifts; the shout our boys heard and thought to be a call for help was in reality what he meant to be his last despairing death cry.

The load was taken from the big gray and equally distributed around among the others, so that a mount was provided for the redskin.

Thus they set out for Kelly's ranch, where a safe arrival was made, Karl having taken them as straight as the crow flies.

They were warmly received, some fears as to their safety having arisen.

The cowboys had managed to keep the stock together during the blizzard, which had lasted so short a time that little, if any, damage resulted.

Little Buckshot was desirous of reaching the village of his people as soon as possible in order to organize a relief expedition to search for his unfortunate companions who might not have met with the rescue that had fallen to his lot.

If they could not save the young braves, it would be at least some satisfaction to know their fate; and, besides—Indians are nothing if not practical—there was all that buffalo meat that would go to feed the wolves and buzzards if not found in a reasonable time.

So Little Buckshot gravely shook hands with Karl and Cuthbert.

"Farewell, brothers," he said. "Where go? Find

chiefs. No find chiefs, come back. Good! Buck-shot love you, and say no forget—no forget.”

And with a wave of his hand he was off, riding away on a borrowed horse, with his head held erect and the pride of his race cropping out of his every movement.

He waved his hand gracefully, and Karl sang out a last “so long,” after which the lone Indian boy galloped out of sight.

The young range riders once again took up their duties, and Cuthbert found what a tough time might be expected in following the business through the rigors of winter.

Of course, the weather moderated again, and they had even some pleasant days, but winter was close at their threshold, and all preparations had been made looking to an especially severe season.

The X bar X outfit was probably as well equipped to meet the cold and storm of winter as any cattle ranch in that region.

Their feeding grounds all adjoined valleys or timber where the cattle could take shelter during the continuance of a blizzard, and from whence they must be driven in time to the more exposed range to avoid their starving to death.

Cuthbert did his part well. He was proud to “hold up his end of the row,” as the boys aptly expressed it, whether in herding cattle, stopping a stampede or riding a bucking broncho without “pulling leather”—that is, not being compelled to grasp the saddle horn or use any support beyond the stanch bridle.

Karl’s affection grew each day.

He believed some kindly Providence had dropped this companion down there for him—just such a fearless, frank, easy-going and good-natured chum as every bright boy longs to meet.

They were never happy long apart; each expe-

rienced a nervous restlessness until the other showed up.

The long, severe winter drew near its close.

Kelly's losses had been severe, but they were small when compared with others, for besides choice feeding ranges, Sunset Ranch boasted of a company of cowboys who were unsurpassed for their skill in herding.

Few animals died from starvation, even though the whole outfit kept on the jump the better part of six days, when the most stupendous storm of the whole winter roared over prairie and hills, with stinging death in its teeth.

The wolves pulled down an occasional weakling, but Karl and Cuthbert took ample revenge upon the gray-coated pirates for their daring, and many a freebooter went to earth before their guns ere the warmer sun of April began to thaw out creeks, and snowbanks melted away.

And still Cuthbert had not spoken.

Once or twice he had thought the time propitious, but something occurred to break in upon their privacy; and, besides, he had a sensitiveness about speaking of family matters that apparently did not reflect any great lustre upon the famous Virginia name of Lee.

So that Karl could only surmise what might be the nature of the trouble that sent this bright young scion of a noble house out into the wilderness.

He really bothered his head very little about the matter. The months he had spent in Cuthbert's society had taught him all he cared to know about the Virginian, and he would have staked his life that the other was incapable of a mean or criminal act.

So, by degrees, they drew near the end of May, when the great annual "round-up" was slated to come off.

Of course, it was to be a grand affair, and one that carried with it severe labors.

Old Sile was master of ceremonies, as he had served in this capacity with signal success on many past occasions.

At this time of the year the cattle had become more or less mixed, and numerous well-grown calves made their advent on the scene, needing attention and the mark of their mothers.

Cowboys and herders from all around came trooping up to Sunset Ranch.

There was an exhilaration in the air that reminded Cuthbert very forcibly of the days when the circus came to the little Virginia town where he had spent his earlier years—these gayly bedecked cavaliers of the plains galloping hither and yon, shouting, and whirling rings of tough rope through the air to check some steer that insisted on breaking away from his fellows. How like knights of old they appeared, centaurs of modern times, able to accomplish such startling feats when mounted that they seemed to be a part of the animal themselves!

It was a glorious spectacle, when, on the auspicious morning, General Old Sile marshaled his forces for the day's great campaign.

He knew where every bunch of cattle was to be found, and, dividing his forces so as to suit the requirements of the occasion, sent this little squad whirling off to the north to round up the cattle on the range bordering Cranberry Run, another to the east to look after the drove stretched through the timber where Karl and Cuthbert had weathered the first blizzard, a third almost due south in search of a wandering herd last seen in the region of Timberman's Coulee, and with an unusually large number of youngsters among them.

So they radiated in parties of from five to ten, like

spokes from the hub of a wheel, reaching out to every quarter of the compass.

The boys were the last to get orders, and they were secretly delighted when Old Sile attached himself to their squad.

"Guess ye think I had ought to be home," said the veteran, with a smile, as Cuthbert looked at him inquiringly. "An old feller like me hadn't ought to be out with young bucks; but I kinder like to see young America work."

And he nodded approval as Karl and Cuthbert ambled alongside.

They had quite a sharp gallop before they reached the broken country where the cattle assigned to their care might be found.

Of course, the first duty was to ride round and round the scattered herd, "milling" them in the cowboy parlance, that is grinding them closer into a compact bunch, so that they could be readily driven, once started, in any direction desired.

With schoolboy shouts they started the bunch toward the ranch.

Other herds were converging that way, so that the whole prairie seemed alive with bellowing cattle, and shouting herders, wheeling to the right and to the left as their practiced eye detected and anticipated some movement on the part of their charges that, if left without attention, might have developed seriously.

Cuthbert had never in all his life beheld so glorious a spectacle.

While the latter were being driven in he had hurried to the Kelly ranch building where he even mounted to the ridgepole of the house, the better from this apology for an eyrie to take in the whole panorama around the circular horizon. Everywhere he saw lowing herds and rollicking cowboys, bent upon making this grand work day of the year a

picnic occasion, when the results of the season might become facts to be set down in cold black and white—it was certainly a picture to forever haunt a mind delighting in scenes of excitement.

The green, flower-studded prairie and the blue heavens overhead, where buzzards floated and vultures soared, made a noble setting for the scene, and Cuthbert was so captivated that he heaved a tremendous sigh of regret when compelled to desert his perch, the voice of Karl calling his name, indicating that his services were in demand below.

When the great herds had been gathered into temporary corrals, or stockades, some made of timber, but the majority of rope, the main business of the day began.

This was in cutting out all unbranded youngsters and what few older animals had escaped the iron on the previous tally.

It was lively work.

In turn each cowboy selected his quarry, manoeuvred to separate it from the balance of the bunch, and when finally his object in this particular had been accomplished the rope was thrown, generally with unerring hand, drawn taut by a skillful move on the part of the trained broncho, and the lassoed beast thrown to the ground.

Then came the others to examine, perchance to admire, but always to press the hot iron against hair and hide—there was a slight sizzling sound, a smell of scorched hair, a few spasmodic kicks from the helpless victim—then the rope came away, and the brand of X bar X, or perhaps a Lone Star, would be there for life.

There was hard work in this, hour after hour, but cowboys are a truly rollicking set and produce fun out of business.

Some comical scenes occurred, that is, they appeared such to those who looked on, but might have

been rather uncomfortable to the party most directly interested, who, perhaps, was being chased by a vicious old steer after the manner of Spanish bull fights, or, having caught a Tartar with his rope, was at a loss how to break loose.

Cuthbert tried his hand at every part of the business.

He wanted to learn all about it, and Karl was delighted.

"Shouldn't ha' believed it, now. Not really!" he exclaimed. "For a tenderfoot chum you're coming up all right."

Cuthbert laughed.

"I'm improving, Karl," he said.

"Improving! Why, you don't have any more room for improvement. From to-day you're a cowboy, and there ain't anybody here as can say 'no' to that."

It was a proud day for the Virginia lad. Perhaps he felt more elated because Polly had been a witness of his triumph—that fact might have encouraged him to strive with unusual zeal to reach the high mark that had been placed before him, for they were great friends, and Polly's commendation was something to be prized.

Of course, Karl was in the first class, Karl who had grown up to this sort of thing, and could not remember the time when he was not able to keep his seat on a horse, and throw a small lasso with good results.

By degrees the various herds were gradually thinned out, and when night came after the grand stock-taking the sadly-demoralized cattle could be started back to the various ranges.

It was full moon and a glorious night when Karl, Cuthbert, Old Sile and the two other herders, having seen their prize bunch safely back to their old anchorage, the terrors of the past day already for-

gotten in nature's demand for food, once more turned the heads of their weary ponies toward the ranch.

Though all of them were dead tired, such fellows can stand an incredible amount of work and live, so that they laughed and joked in the merry manner peculiar to their class, as the homeward trail was taken up.

Old Sile had a fund of reminiscences at his fingers' ends, and could relate yarns without number of the days when he had trapped alongside the great Kit Carson, or hunted Indians with Custer and Buffalo Bill.

Such tales always sound better when related by the one who actually experienced the adventure recorded, and in the eyes of Cuthbert, as well as Karl, the ancient cowboy was a veritable hero—others less credulous thought he was only a border Munchausen, and liked his yarns for their thrilling originality.

But whether he stretched these adventures simply to interest the boys or told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the old boy had really been concerned in more perilous scrapes than any man within three States; and, through all, his nerve still remained as steady and his odd chuckle as predominant as in early days.

He was a type fast disappearing from the Wild West, a remnant of the good old Kit Carson days, when forty-niners crossed the Great Divide, braving the perils by the way, and yet able, old chap that he was, to hold his own with any of the young blood on the cattle ranges.

CHAPTER VIII.

HORSE THIEVES.

After the round-up Karl and Cuthbert went back to night-wrangling for a time, as the cattle needed little attention.

The weather was fine, and it seemed no discomfort to pass the hours under the starry heavens, occasionally taking a scout around the horses to see that none strayed away, and to discover any hungry wolf hovering nigh.

Much of the time was spent reclining upon the soft earth, conversing or napping, one always remaining on guard.

There was always more or less danger from horse thieves, white or red—desperate, bad men roamed the border in those days, to whom the sight of saddle horses was always a spur that tempted them to kidnap the whole outfit, and those who guarded the animals knew full well what stern measures were called for should such an emergency arise—for, while a man who shot another down in cold blood might be pardoned according to border ethics, having always the excuse of justifiable self-defense, one who ran away with horses deserved the worst fate possible, and if caught his crime was never condoned.

Hence it was always necessary to keep horses, grazing at night after a few days' work, under the watchful eye of a guard who had orders to spare not in case strangers attempted to stampede the stock.

Here it was that Cuthbert finally told Karl the story of his life, with pitying stars above, the gentle night wind rustling the grasses and drawing sweet perfume from myriads of flowers.

“Well, to begin with, I’m rich—rich enough to—well, I needn’t tell you just how rich. My people sent me to college and I always had the best of everything, though my life has been shadowed with a sorrow which I suppose must have left its impression.

“My mother, whom I loved fondly, died a little more than a year ago, leaving all the property to me.

“Just before she died she confided to me the family skeleton, and bound me with a mission to which I solemnly promised to devote much of my time.

“It was an old story—there had been a younger sister, whose marriage brought estrangement with the family—a tragedy had followed and then years later it was learned that a motherless child had been left in the father’s care.

“Every possible effort was made to discover this lost one, but each trail seemed to end in dismal failure.

“Instead of discouraging mother this only served to arouse her ambition, so that the one hope of her life was to find this girl, if living, and share with her the wealth that had come down from my rich, but tyrannical, old Grandfather Lee.

“Thus, dying, she bequeathed her mission to me, and I pledged myself to keep up the search wherever I went.

“Well, after leaving college, I devoted nearly a year to the task, pursuing all manner of clues, to only meet with continued disappointment.

“The last glimmer of hope had brought me out West in search of a man named Jasper Hosmer, to whom it was said the child’s father had left his girl when dying of yellow fever in New Orleans.

“As I had always longed to experience the delights of cowboy life, I took advantage of the opportunity you afforded me to kill two birds with

one stone, and, as all trace of Hosmer was lost in an ill-fated wagon train that got into trouble with hostile Indians, I allowed my love for you and for the wild life of a range rider to keep me a year at dear old Sunset Ranch.

"Now conscience begins to reproach me whenever I think of mother and the solemn promise I gave her.

"It is time I broke away from the happy life that just suits my temperament, and return once more to the wild-goose chase of this *ignis fatuus* girl."

Cuthbert ended with a sigh, as though his heart were exceedingly heavy.

And Karl was also depressed.

Somehow he had never contemplated such a thing as a separation from this dear old chum who had entered into his life so fully.

"You see," said Karl, with tears in his eyes, "I ain't got no close relations or things of that sort. The old man—I mean father—he got down under in a wild stampede of skeered cattle in a 'lectric storm. I must 'a bin a pretty husky kid 'bout then. Anyway I guess I was old enough to look after myself. Mister Kelly says the cowboys adopted me. 'Spose that's 'bout the size of it. They taught me how to sit a broncho and cock a gun. But, Cuthbert you're most the only chum I've ever had and if you go away——"

He broke off. The thought was too bitter.

"Don't take on so, Karl. I'm rich enough to buy out old Mr. Kelly ten times over, and there's no earthly reason why you shouldn't come East and enter an academy. Why not? Any time you choose to do that I'm ready to meet all the expense, and would, moreover, consider it a great joy and privilege."

Karl was so overwhelmed that he couldn't utter a word of gratitude, though his heart was full.

They spoke of the future, and Cuthbert even laid plans of how they would tour Europe on horseback some summer when Karl was on his vacation from college.

Youth can conjure up such brilliant and pleasant fancies, stepping over years as though gifted with the famous seven-league boots.

But at least this exchange of confidences brought the two young friends still closer together, if such a thing were possible.

They did not neglect their business, and the horses were carefully guarded each night.

Karl never breathed a word of what was said, and it was a mystery just how the news got abroad, but about this time the word seemed to pass among the boys that they had been entertaining an angel unawares—that the erstwhile tenderfoot, who had proudly earned his right to the title of night-wrangler, herder and cowboy, was a young millionaire of Virginia, able to buy up a dozen ranches with all the cattle then on the ranges, if he chose.

Perhaps some lost letter of Cuthbert's, from his lawyer, it might be, gave the story away.

The boys had liked him before for his frank and manly character—they worshiped him now as a young Midas whose touch could turn everything into gold—such is the astonishing power of wealth, even on a lonely cattle ranch.

No one could get a word from Cuthbert on the subject—he was annoyed to discover that it had come out, fearing that the old familiar freedom of the happy-go-lucky cow punchers would be disturbed by the fact that he was wealthy.

He did not know how utterly independent a cowboy may be on his native heath, ready to hobnob with prince or Russian Grand Duke, as Alexis found during his buffalo hunt under the guidance of Buffalo Bill.

Just how unfortunate this publication of his financial responsibility might be Cuthbert did not realize until the results made themselves evident.

It was a moonlight night, a delightful evening, and duty became a pleasure when it kept one in the open.

Never had the scene appeared more beautiful to Cuthbert, whose soul was deeply grieved to reflect that he would soon have to leave it for the busy haunts of men and his old hopeless task, the search that had baffled his mother and already exhausted a year of his young life.

A heavy weight appeared to depress him. He thought it was wholly occasioned by these sad reflections, not dreaming that coming events might cast their shadow before.

Karl endeavored, after his fashion, to cheer his friend up, but the "blues" hung heavy about Cuthbert all evening, despite his earnest effort to dissipate the cloud.

The boys took turns at sentry duty.

It was watch and watch—three hours on and three off with them.

Karl woke his friend at midnight, and after an exchange of a few sentences dropped among the blankets just vacated, for, with the advance of the night, a chill had crept into the air which made a snug nest most acceptable.

"The horses are strangely uneasy," Cuthbert thought, as he made his first round.

He wondered why.

The heavens were quite destitute of clouds, so that it could not be a storm brewing—indeed, by this time he had learned to foretell the coming of such a visitor as well as the most accomplished cow puncher, to whom the weather means so much, and the clear atmosphere had not the faintest sign of trouble from this source.

"Is it wolves?" The question occurred to him without any of that old-time tremor that the very sound of the word produced.

These "pesky varmints," as Old Sile always termed them, had of late given more or less trouble, but their audacity had been severely punished, and, besides, the horses had never appeared so uneasy when these skulkers hung around the feeding ground—such prairie steeds early learn how to plant a pair of good hoofs just where they will do the most good, and woe to the carrion-feeder that incautiously comes within reach.

What then?

"I guess it must be horse thieves hanging about," said Cuthbert, hesitatingly.

Cowboy ponies seem to become imbued with some of the instincts that animate their masters, and among other traits hatred for the red men easily takes possession of their faculties.

"It—might—be—Indians," he muttered, slowly.

This time a quiver ran through Cuthbert's frame. Perhaps it was in part alarm, for the boy had only once been under fire, at the time the cattle thieves were stopped in their game; but he came of sterling stock, and, setting his teeth, resolved to keep constantly on the watch, ready to take a hand in the game should the thieving sons of the prairie attempt to run the horses off.

With possible danger hovering near, the noises of the night which had erstwhile sounded so soothing appeared to assume an entirely different aspect.

Even the crooning night wind, murmuring through the grasses on the little rise beyond, was suggestive of muttered voices, while the hoot of an owl in the gopher village to the west had all the necessary qualifications of just such a signal as Indians are wont to exchange.

At least, Cuthbert was wide awake now—the drowsiness had departed from his eyes.

He made a second round.

The moon shone brightly, and the horses appeared to be clustered together more closely than usual. Occasionally one of them would sniff the air, perhaps strike the ground with his fore foot, and then whinny in a peculiar way, throwing up his head and mane, and pushing into the center of the feeding bunch.

Cuthbert figured out that the danger, if there was any, must be to windward, else the ponies would not have scented it.

As usual, they had made their temporary camp to leeward of the feeding ground, and Karl lay there now asleep.

It was his duty, then, to patrol the side where possible danger might lurk.

He knew Indian character well enough to make sure that if red horse thieves were in the neighborhood they would approach with all caution.

“Perhaps I had better stir Karl up,” he muttered “Two would be more able to handle the difficulty than one.”

Then other thoughts came—possibly pride had something to do with the matter, for Cuthbert was a Virginian, with all the confidence that marks those who claim that State for a mother, and he disliked exceedingly the idea of confessing that, after all, in an emergency he was not able to hold his own.

It would have been only prudent had he decided to call Karl.

Cuthbert found reason to regret his course when it was too late to remedy the matter.

The little rise was just to the windward of his station—perhaps from that point he could see better what lay beyond, for the grass was as yet not long enough to conceal men and horses.

Of course an old campaigner like the ancient ranger and cow puncher, Old Sile, would have pursued an entirely different system of tactics—his course would have been governed by caution, while Cuthbert felt only the impulse to see, forgetting that in taking this step he was placing himself in a position to be easily discovered by the Argus eyes of those prowlers of the night.

Which goes to prove that there are many things in the lexicon of border lore which may not be mastered, even after a year's experience and study at close range.

So Cuthbert made for the rise, stooping low amid the grass, and stopping every now and then for an observation.

Naturally, he believed he was carrying out his part of the business after the manner of an old, experienced hand, though doubtless Karl might have been able to give him points that would have proven valuable.

If there were any enemies near by they must have lain pretty close in the grass, for, while Cuthbert claimed to possess keen eyes, he failed to detect them.

Thus he gained the low swell from whence an observation might be taken as far as the power of the moonlight permitted.

"Everything seems peaceful enough around here," he said to himself.

Looking to the east he could see the dark mass of ponies, and fancied he was able to make out the spot where Karl lay sleeping—dear old Karl, who had filled an aching void in his heart and life that should never be vacant again.

Far beyond Cuthbert looked, shading his eyes with his hand, but nothing suspicious appeared to come under his observation.

Then, turning on his heel, he swept the western

plain with his eager gaze, passing over rod after rod of territory.

"My gracious!" he exclaimed. "I could have sworn I saw something suggestive move out there. That's the second time, too."

There was a pause of a few minutes; then he went on:

"It must be a big clump of buffalo grass, and the mystic moonlight is playing with my fancy."

Once more he stared, then he gave vent to a prolonged "Ah!"

He dropped to his knees and clutched his Winchester, eagerly.

"No mistake this time," he muttered; "I'm in for it."

Far away he saw dark objects that moved, and upon these he rested his attention.

He knew Karl could immediately have decided their nature, and hence it was incumbent upon him to figure out whether they were feeding antelope or Indian ponies.

That was where knowledge of prairie lore came into play.

Presently he became convinced that the animals were not moving freely—deer, when feeding raise their heads at certain intervals to look around, conscious of the fact that danger ever lurks near for such innocent quarry, but these animals never once did this.

Moreover, the boy decided that they walked about the limits of their circumscribed feeding ground with a sort of limping gait.

He knew what that implied.

They were ponies that had been hobbled after the usual manner of the Sioux.

Where were their crafty owners?

Cuthbert confessed to a cold chill as he turned his

head again and surveyed the peaceful scene on the other side of the miniature divide.

How long would this quiet of the night, this peacefulness remain unbroken—at any minute, the hideous yells of the savage horse raiders might break forth upon the air, stampeding the already alarmed horses and playing all manner of mischief with their charges.

Nothing now must stand in the way of his arousing Karl, and seeking his advice—even the thought of his cheery presence gave the other new confidence in the outcome.

Together, side by side, and mounted on their good steeds, they might be able to circumvent the audacious rascals who sought to secure what was so valuable in the eyes of an Indian—ponies.

One last look toward the distant objects that had so excited his alarm, as if to assure himself against any possible mistake, and he would be off for the camp.

Again he strained his vision to make positive, all unconscious of the fact that even while on his knees upon this swell he rendered his figure a conspicuous object to several pairs of keen eyes close by.

A form, dark and lithe, with movements as sinewy as those of a panther, arose silently out of the grass to one side of Cuthbert and only a short rope's throw away.

At the same time other heads appeared in various quarters, showing that the knoll had been peopled at the time of his advent on the scene, so that it was a mere matter of luck that Cuthbert had failed to stumble upon one of the flattened-out figures.

That might have hastened events somewhat, but could hardly have made any appreciable difference in the ultimate outcome.

The first Indian stood erect—he seemed to whirl



"The noose settled over the boy's shoulders." See page 111.



something around his head, slowly at first, but with increasing momentum.

It was a rope, a lariat, and this time intended for higher quarry than pony or steer.

Having acquired the proper velocity, the coils were launched forth upon their mission. The casting of a rope is a pretty thing when done by the deft hand of an accomplished lariat thrower, but there may necessarily be times when one loses interest in the performance.

A cowboy recognizes the peculiar hissing sound made by the swift passage of the noose, and its attendant coils through space—it is a “swish” that, once heard, can never be forgotten. And the first intuitive action of a herder upon catching this sound is to duck his head, to throw himself prone upon the ground, or perhaps elevate both hands after the manner of a stagecoach “hold-up,” so that the encircling noose at least may not render him absolutely helpless by fastening his arms rigidly at his side, as though he were a mummy.

With Cuthbert it was a case of dropping squat upon the ground—instinct and not reason governs the action in such a case.

He was just a little too late, or else the rope came with unusual swiftness, having been cast by a master hand.

However that might be the noose settled over the boy's shoulders—he remembered feeling a quick jerk that announced its being made taut, and of trying to run toward the spot from whence it came, his only chance being to loosen the noose.

Karl was on his mind when he uttered a shrill cry of alarm that must have carried far over the prairie and aroused his friend, always a light sleeper.

Although his action was well taken, it failed of a result, for a second loop fell over his head and from quite a different quarter.

These Indians appeared to be able to use the rope quite as well as the best of white cowboys.

Cuthbert was no longer able to run in the direction he desired to go—indeed, held from both sides, even as he had many times helped to hold a refractory steer, he found it utterly out of the question to move—breathing was difficult, since that second rope partially encircled his neck.

And as he struggled against his fate the Virginia boy heard the thunder of many hoofs, as the Indians who had been hidden with their ponies in the longer grass below the ridge went galloping wildly toward the saddle band—heard the chorus of savage yells that would serve to terrify and stampede the animals over which he and Karl had been placed in charge, and mingled with these the clamorous report of fire-arms added to the racket.

His heart sank within him until it felt like a lump of lead.

Strange to say, it was not of himself or his desperate position he thought—Karl alone was in his mind, Karl who would endeavor to defend his bunch of horses, although the shrieking stampeders were twenty to one.

Karl, who would perhaps go down riddled with bullets, a fate that has ere now befallen many a night wrangler when horse thieves were on the range.

It all happened so quickly that Cuthbert must always have some difficulty in remembering just what occurred.

He heard the tumult sweep over the ridge, heard the roar of many hoofs that announced the accomplishment of the stampede, caught the steady report of Karl's gun as the prairie boy sturdily opened fire upon the marauders, intent upon punishing, if he could not save.

Then those who held the ropes, as if by a preconcerted movement, jerked him over and dragged him

along the ground at the heels of an Indian pony. Somewhat battered and on the verge of fainting from the shock, Cuthbert felt himself snatched up by a strong arm and placed before a rider—then the exultant yells of the successful marauders died away, even the steady thumping of horses' hoofs close to him became like the murmur of a fretful stream, and for the first time in his life Cuthbert Lee swooned fully away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SIOUX VILLAGE.

For the life of him, when his senses returned, Cuthbert could not tell where he was.

He lay upon the ground near a small fire, between which and himself dark, shadowy figures moved.

Perhaps he had been sick and was just now recovering in the camp—but he could not remember, rack his brains as he might, any of the circumstances attending the case where he was when the event happened, and under what conditions.

Were these cowboys moving around him?

He could detect the presence of many horses near by, for a range rider's ear becomes very acute, especially to all the movements of stock.

Cuthbert endeavored to raise himself to a sitting position, the better to satisfy his mind, but to his intense amazement he was unable to accomplish such a thing.

Then the truth burst upon his mind—he was bound—a prisoner.

At about the same time he made another discovery, equally startling.

This concerned the identity of those who hovered about the little fire at which they appeared to be cooking some meat.

They were Indians.

So the whole truth broke in upon his mind and he remembered all—the uneasiness of the saddle band, his prowling to windward to ascertain the cause, the vigil upon the knoll, his discovery of the hobbled Indian ponies, the casting of a lariat, his downfall,

the rush of the red raiders, their awful clamor to stampede the horses, then his being dragged over the prairie, jerked up on a pony, and after that unconsciousness.

Now was the opportunity to try the mettle of the lad—would he weakly give in to despair on account of the conditions surrounding him, or rise above these distracting circumstances, facing the situation bravely as became a son of the illustrious family? At least, he was alive and his hurts trifling. Evidently the horse thieves did not mean to take his life, or they would not have gone to all this trouble.

It puzzled him quite a little to understand why they had carried him off at all, since their object must surely have been to seize the stock, and this had evidently been accomplished.

Had it been Karl, now, he might have figured out a case, for an old Sioux chief had long since taken a strange and violent fancy for the prairie lad, believing he resembled a boy of his own who had been carried off with that dread scourge, smallpox.

Several times had old Standing Elk endeavored to win Karl's consent to abide with him, become an Indian and succeed him later on as ruler of the nomads. The inducement was not half strong enough to work upon the lad, and he had flatly refused.

Now, such was the apparent infatuation of the old chief for Karl that Cuthbert would not have been very much surprised had an attempt been made to carry him off; but he knew no reason why they should want a tenderfoot.

At any rate, he determined that come what would he must never show the white feather—he had yearned for adventure, and here it had descended upon him with a vengeance, so that his soul could revel in it to the queen's taste.

Accordingly he deliberately called out to the figures squatting about the fire:

"Hello, there!"

One of the Indians at once shuffled toward him, his figure outlined against the starry heavens. Cuthbert looked keenly at the fellow, but it would have been an impossible task to have recognized even a friend in such dim light, and rigged out in the toggery a Sioux brave delights to don when on the war-path or a horse-thieving expedition.

"How!" grunted the dusky child of the wilderness.

"See here, can't you let me up. I'm tired of lying here, and besides, hungry, too."

Cuthbert spoke boldly enough, having resolved to let these fellows who had stampeded and run away with a portion of the saddle horses belonging to Sunset Ranch see that he did not fear them—knowing full well that this was the best way to win their respect.

"Um," grunted the Indian, "me see."

He returned to the fire and held a brief consultation with some one, coming back presently with a clean proposition.

"White boy give um promise not to run away, me untie hands and feet."

"You bet I will, and be quick about it," said Cuthbert, who ached to stretch himself.

Apparently the Indians were not quite ready to fully confide in the honor of a paleface. They may have had cause to regret such faith in the past, for, while Cuthbert's bonds fell away, his waist was encircled with the noose of a tough rope, to the other end of which, only a few yards away, the dusky guard hung out. At least this was a hundred per cent. better than lying there like an old log.

He stretched himself thoroughly and then walked directly up to the fire.

It was not a great way from early dawn, and in all probability his captors would not halt again for hours, so that he might just as well get a little refreshment with the rest.

Acting upon the lines he had so hurriedly laid out for his guidance, and under the knowledge that Indians always admire boldness in a kid, Cuthbert demanded some meat.

This was readily given, and he set to work chewing at the tough morsel, while a dozen eyes watched his movements.

Already he had made a discovery that gave him a point or two.

The old chief, Standing Elk, was in charge of the bunch of horse raiders.

As a usual thing these raids were wholly conducted by the hot-headed younger element of the tribe, the more conservative disclaiming any connection with the affair should trouble ensue, though always ready and willing to take their share of the spoils after a successful fray.

Cuthbert felt sure that some motive beyond the base desire to steal horses had animated the famous old chief, and brought him down from his northern stronghold.

He figured out that it had been the intention of Standing Elk to kidnap Karl and force him to live among the Sioux lodges, filling the place in his heart made vacant by the death of his adored son. If so, a great blunder had occurred, and they had carried off the wrong party.

Still, Standing Elk did not appear discouraged, and Cuthbert actually believed the old rascal was watching him do battle with the tough venison with a gleam of satisfaction in his crafty eyes.

"Can it be that Standing Elk has changed his mind and decided that I will answer his purpose just as well?" he wondered.

Cuthbert winced at the prospect before him, but realized that if the intentions of the chief were carried out he was in a fair way to learn more about Indian life than had ever entered into his philosophy, even in his wildest dreams.

That the halt was merely a temporary one, to rest the animals and get a bite of refreshment themselves, was now made manifest; for at a gruff signal from the leader the young bucks kicked out the sunken fire at which their primitive cooking had been done and scattered to attend to the stock.

All became temporary confusion—hobbled ponies were brought up, men sprang upon their backs and some led a captured animal.

Cuthbert had already eagerly looked around, in the hope of discovering his own good steed among these latter, scrutinizing each in turn, but in this disappointment met him.

He did find Buckskin, however, though it was a mystery how the marauders had ever captured the yellow broncho, since his hatred for anything Indian was so great that he would lay back his ears and look ugly if even approached by a copper-colored gentleman.

Yet there he was, and apparently as docile as any tired cayuse in the lot.

“Ah, there, Buckskin!” he cried, as he walked up to pat the animal.

Buckskin gave a whinny of recognition, for he had come to love Cuthbert only second to Karl.

“Poor old chap!” said Cuthbert, sadly, as he stroked the velvety muzzle. “You can’t think what we’ve gotten into. Don’t you know your master may be out there scooting to the dear old ranch with a pack of these fellows whooping in his ear—or he may be lying dead on the prairie?”

The last thought was too much for him and his eyes filled with tears, while the prairie steed, looked

darkly at him and probably tried his best to comprehend it all.

Be it said to the Virginia boy's credit that his own desperate situation did not give him half the anxiety he experienced for Karl.

The Indians were not averse to him riding the vicious Buckskin nag—perhaps some of them had endeavored to do so with only a rope hackamore to control the little demon, and speedily found cause to regret their daring.

The rope was transferred to the neck of the broncho, and during the ride some of the young bucks managed to keep alongside their prisoner.

However anxious Cuthbert may have been he disguised his feelings admirably, and endeavored to enter into conversation with one and then another of the Sioux.

Weary as they were, the braves did not seem in a humor to talk, and beyond an occasional "how" or a guttural grunt, he extracted little information from them.

The dawn came.

Cuthbert found, as he suspected, that their course was generally due north as the crow flies.

He knew then they were aiming for the far-distant Sioux village by the Sweetwater.

Many mysteries would have to be explained before he could understand why these red men wanted to run off with a white cowboy at the time they raided his stock—a dangerous proceeding, since he would be in a position to identify the horse thieves should a force of cavalry be sent in pursuit, as sometimes happened.

With the rising of the sun the ghostly fears and phantoms of the night fled, and he was able to get what enjoyment was possible out of the situation.

Among the braves around him he saw one who appeared better natured than the rest, and at once

decided to do all in his power to cultivate his friendship, with the idea of learning about Karl. This was Red Hat, a splendid fellow, over six feet high and of magnificent proportions.

Cuthbert cantered alongside him, and endeavored to get this colossal brave to converse.

"Me no talk," said Red Hat, dryly. "Ask me nothing. Me know nothing. So."

With which he went on calmly gazing out across the expanse of desert in front, and nodding sagaciously at the youngster at his side.

"But you surely know where we are going and why I am being taken."

"Know nothing," repeated Red Hat. "Boy very silly. He have nice time. He eat, he sleep, he drink, he laugh. Ha, ha! You never want to leave us. Look, Standing Elk tell you all. Ask him."

A chuckle close by told him they were being observed, and turning he saw the chief's beady eyes fixed full upon him, while an indescribable grin marked those angular features.

"Ah!" said Standing Elk, grimly. "So white boy not satisfied. You like it by'm-by."

"I shall never like it," cried Cuthbert, excitedly; "and as for you, I shall never like you. I just hate you."

"Ah! We see later," said Standing Elk, with the self-same smile playing about his thin lips. "Feel so glad afterwards. Plenty eat. Plenty sleep. Hath not the good Red Hat spoken?"

"Not good enough for me," said Cuthbert, smiling in spite of himself. "I don't want your food. I'd rather be back with Karl and the others. And I tell you what, I'll be off just the first chance I get. You hear that, Standing Elk?"

Cuthbert spoke harshly, and Standing Elk listened, his face ever wearing that peculiar grin.

The smile relaxed for a moment, and a slight

frown gathered over the heavy brows with Cuthbert's last word.

"White boy fool. Try run away—ugh!"

And with a significant gesture, he swung his gun to the "present" and peered along the barrel.

Then the eternal grin settled again over the brown features, and, chuckling aloud, he sauntered to the front.

They were still on the prairie.

The same great sea of grass, flower-studded and waving in the morning breeze, surrounded them on all sides.

There could be no doubt but that the marauders desired to place many leagues between themselves and the hard riders of Sunset Ranch ere the shades fell again.

Perhaps they did not exactly fear an encounter with Kelly's cowboys, but common prudence and a desire to save the stolen horses urged them to make good use of their time.

Cuthbert never had such a ride.

Accustomed to feeling a good saddle under him, this bareback business came hard after several hours' hard consecutive work, so that at noon he begged an old Indian blanket and strapped this on Buckskin's back, after which his discomfort vanished.

The pace was no longer hot, though it was simply wonderful what endurance those tough little ponies were capable of showing. Steadily the miles slipped away until Cuthbert could no longer give even a rough guess as to the distance separating him from his friends.

Far into the night, by the aid of the bright moon, the Indian band pushed on.

The country was entirely unfamiliar to the prisoner, since in his longest rides with Karl when out on a hunt he had never reached this section.

It grew more broken now, as they approached the foothills.

Seen in the misty moonlight, it presented new features that might have aroused his interest, only that utter weariness prevented him from enjoying anything.

Cuthbert had never been so tired in his life. Every bone in his body ached—perhaps more as a result of his rough treatment after being roped by the Indians and dragged over the prairie, than because of the ride, since he had long since ceased to be dismayed at anything in the way of this latter.

Even the young bucks at length began to show plain evidences of distress, and a halt became necessary.

Pride caused Cuthbert to disguise his real condition. It was just as strong in the breast of this Virginia lad as with the untutored sons of the wilderness, and he slipped from Buckskin's back with forced agility, assuming a gayety he was far from feeling. Some dropped down and slept, while others cooked more tough venison.

Cuthbert pushed his way to the fire and toasted a bit of meat for himself. Then he threw his form upon the velvety turf, masticated his food, and rolled over upon the Indian blanket he had taken from the back of his horse. It was like all Indian blankets, anything but clean, but Cuthbert had gotten over many foolish notions that had accompanied him West, and thought only of the comfort it gave.

He blinked up at the clouds now passing over the moon for a few minutes or so, and then exhausted nature carried him to dreamland.

The steady downpour of rain and the mutter of voices aroused him.

At first he thought he had been asleep but a few minutes, and at sight of the Indians making preparations to resume the flight he was sorely dismayed;

but upon noting the position of the moon back of the clouds he decided it must be not far from dawn.

That was the shortest five hours Cuthbert ever experienced.

Now his apprenticeship as horse wrangler on a wet night came into good play.

Rain had little terror for the Indians, accustomed to taking things as they came, the evil with the good, philosophically.

Cuthbert threw the old blanket over his shoulders, intending to ride bareback for a while, at least.

It was a melancholy spectacle, the start they made under the dripping heavens, but only by grunts did these toughened riders evince any disgust—white men would have very probably given expression to their feelings by profanity.

The morning broke gloomy enough.

Still Cuthbert could see that Standing Elk was delighted over the rain, and he figured out that the braves were willing to take their ducking, since this same downpour would utterly blot out their trail.

To the prisoner, however, this consciousness only added to his gloom.

That he was able to restrain his natural feeling of despair and imitate his captors in taciturn indifference was greatly to his credit.

The rain eventually ceased, but their journey seemed to have no end.

The sun came out and soon each man and horse was steaming.

Cuthbert kept the course as well as the conditions allowed, for he fully expected sooner or later to come this way again, perhaps on faithful old Buckskin, and it would be of great advantage to him to know in which direction the great cattle range lay.

From words dropped now and then he learned that they would probably make the village on the

Sweetwater late that night if the ponies held out and nothing unforeseen happened.

He felt he would be glad, for the ride was certainly getting to be a bit troublesome—the lack of saddle and bridle counted for much in a long journey.

One thing he had discovered; his Winchester in the possession of a young buck, who seemed especially proud because the wizard gun had fallen into his hands as a prize.

Cuthbert began to have new hopes that he might yet be able to escape, since horse and rifle had not deserted him.

One or two more short halts for rest or a break to their fast brought them once more to nightfall and darkness, for the moon was not scheduled to rise until some time later.

The short interval afforded them a rest.

Then once more the cavalcade went forward on what was apparently the home stretch.

The prairie lay behind and they were now traveling a hilly country. Trees became common, and excited Cuthbert's interest, since he had been so long on the open plains.

Even the Indian ponies seemed to know instinctively that they were drawing near the home corral, for they stretched out with a new vigor that aroused Buckskin to do his prettiest, nor was the old cowboy mount to be left lagging by any cayuse ever ridden by a Sioux brave.

At last the terrible journey came to an end.

Cuthbert was secretly well pleased, for to himself he owned up to being sorely tired. The last few miles of their ride took them along the bank of the river, and with the silvery moonlight on the water, casting fantastic shadows where the trees overhung its brink, the scene was very beautiful to one who

loved nature, and who had seen so little of this sort of thing for a year back.

Then came the Indian village, nestled among the hills.

A more romantic location could not well have been chosen, though possibly there were more prosaic motives influencing the tribal leaders when they planted their lodge poles in this same spot, for it was admirably situated for defense, and the country roundabout fairly abounded in game.

Cuthbert, who had determined to observe all the curious things possible connected with these strange people, was interested at once in the welcome accorded the returning war and raiding party.

A Roman triumphal entry might have exceeded it in the splendor of chariots and appointments, but it could not have done so in the matter of noise and rank enthusiasm.

Every warrior, squaw and papoose within the confines of the village shouted and whooped and shrieked in their great delight—all this spoil and not even one man lost—it was the most remarkable event of years, and Standing Elk, yes, every young buck in his company, was a red hero of the hour, upon whom compliments and roasted dog must be lavished to show the appreciation in which their fellows held them.

So interested was Cuthbert in these entertaining sights that he even forgot his fatigue, and the depressing fact of his being a prisoner until the curious squaws around pinched him to see if he were really alive.

Success in their undertaking and the fact of their once more being at home made the Indians of the expedition relax from their usual stolid condition—indeed, for the nonce they painted the town red.

Cuthbert was therefore not received with blows, and he had cause to congratulate himself.

They speedily shoved him into a tepee and left him alone.

Perhaps it would have been natural for any one in so desperate a condition to have lain awake and worried over his grievous state, but young Lee was an exceedingly practical lad and possessed of good health as well as a fair share of animal spirits, so that he chose rather to look at things from a business standpoint. He was fairly well treated, and had good friends, who would search far and wide to find his whereabouts. Karl had not been injured during the raid and stampede, as he had since learned, though two of the braves bore wounds that attested to the accuracy of the night wrangler's aim at the time they rushed the saddle band.

On the whole, Cuthbert had reason to be thankful matters were no worse.

So he turned over in the easiest position his circumstances would allow, and went to sleep almost as calmly as though he had been in the little den he occupied in company with dear old Karl whenever their duties allowed them to be near the Kelly ranch. There is nothing like having a phlegmatic disposition, or a control over the bodily forces by a determined will.

Doubtless the feasting and clamor in the Sioux village over the success of the foray continued pretty much through the night, but it did not disturb the rest of the tired prisoner, who slept "like a log," as he himself expressed it later.

When he awoke it was past sunup, and the interior of the skin tepee, which he had occupied in company with several bucks who must have come in later, was quite light.

If Cuthbert was worried over the peculiar conditions that confronted him, he gave no indication of the fact.

Apparently this thing of being carried off in so

romantic a manner was a novelty that might not be so very unpleasant to a young adventure-loving fellow, who could make the best of a bad bargain.

He stepped over the recumbent forms of the two braves, yet light as was his tread one of them opened his eyes and with only a grunt arose to follow him from the lodge.

Cuthbert concluded the old chief had instituted these two his guards, and doubtless had threatened dire consequences in case through their neglect of duty the prisoner escaped.

Ordinarily it might be expected that being considered a person of such importance would arouse a feeling of satisfaction, yet Cuthbert believed he would willingly descend from his pedestal and do without his attendants could he be once more transported to the side of his chum in the shadows of the long, low building at Sunset Ranch.

CHAPTER X.

AN INDIAN BRAVE.

Once outside the tepee and Cuthbert saw a sight that was full of interest for him.

An Indian village is always picturesque, no matter how dirty, just as a gypsy camp charms the eye, while the nose may at the same time take objections to the facts.

Especially interesting is the early hour when the blue smoke from many fires is curling upward into the clear morning air, and the odor of cooking greets the hungry observer. Doubtless the rollicking orgies of baked dog and its accompaniments, together with a celebration that lasted far into the small hours of the night, had proven a little too much for the usually early rising inhabitants of the big Sioux village, for, although the sun was up, having stolen a march upon them, they were still creeping out of their lodges, looking the worse for their frolic.

It was in truth a pretty scene, and Cuthbert found himself able to admire it, forgetting his own troubles for the moment.

The village was delightfully situated, with trees around its borders, a bulwark of hazel bushes skirting one end, and the river gurgling close by.

Overhead flew the king bird—buzzards sailed majestically in the heavens, or perched upon neighboring trees, scavengers of the village, while here a long-legged blue crane stalked along the river bank intent upon his morning meal, which he waded in to secure.

Yes, the lodges, marked with rude drawings intended to represent the prowess of their owners in

battle and the chase, the gypsy-like fires, the prowling curs, the neighing horses in their corral, the lounging bucks, busy squaws and playing youngsters—all these things Cuthbert saw and comprehended in one picture that would never leave his mind. Whether his stay with these nomads of the wilderness be long or short, it had come about without any design on his part, and he determined that he might just as well learn all he could of their ways, their peculiar customs descended from remote ancestors, and, in brief, give himself over wholly to the enjoyment of the singular experience, rather than mope about bemoaning his sad fate.

If he was to be the adopted son of so great a chief as Standing Elk, there would doubtless come to him certain honors that might in a measure compensate him for the loss of his freedom.

So, flinging away dull care, Cuthbert endeavored to enter into the spirit of the novel situation with a vim that was bound to gain the good will of his new, dusky brothers.

He soon discovered Standing Elk's tepee, as it was of greater dimensions than most of the others—in fact, only the council lodge exceeded it in size.

The artistic decorations were doubtless very elegant from an Indian point of view, and Cuthbert found them interesting enough, though he believed he could have improved upon the manner of their execution.

They portrayed a long and eventful career, in which Standing Elk had done his share of hard fighting—perhaps his recent successful raid might be described by characters only intelligible to the sign-reading red man.

In one place Cuthbert discovered some rude attempts at describing soldiers on horses, surrounded by Indians, the soldiers being cut down to the last man.

His mind at once flew to the massacre of dashing General Custer and his command on the Little Big Horn, a horror still fresh in the minds of all those upon the border, and the conviction grew that Standing Elk must have participated in this dreadful battle.

The old chief came out and greeted him with a cheerful "How!"

That one word can be made to signify almost every emotion from anger to delight, when falling from an Indian's lips.

Cuthbert gravely shook hands with the chief, whom contact with the whites had given advantages not possessed by all his tribes.

He could even swear a little on a pinch, and loved gold because it represented more tobacco and fire water.

Cuthbert drew him into conversation, and instead of answering his questions with grunts and shrugs, as usually an Indian will, Standing Elk descended from his dignity and even strung a few words together after his own peculiar fashion.

"Am I a prisoner?" demanded the boy.

"P'raps," said the chief, with a grin.

"You have taken me away from my people and against my will. I don't understand it all. What have I ever done to you, chief?"

"Nice white boy, make um big brave."

Cuthbert should have been flattered, but just at the time he felt only indignant.

"But I don't want to be a big brave—I prefer to be with Karl—you have no right to keep me here against my will," he said, defiantly.

The old chief shrugged his shoulders.

"Me wanted Karl—he too quick with shoot. Nother time, mebbe."

There was apparently little satisfaction to be gotten out of this stubborn old fellow, who had been



"I give you warning, Chief, that . . . I'm going to escape as soon as I can." See page 131.

brought up to believe that might made right, and who could only be brought to his senses by the appearance of Uncle Sam's boys in blue, his old-time hated and feared enemies.

"Well, I give you fair warning, chief, that I'll never agree to stay here, and that I'm going to escape just as soon as I can."

Instead of showing signs of anger at this bold speech, the old rascal chuckled, as though it really tickled him.

"White boy better um not—heap distance, much danger—no good. Stay here, be happy, eat much baked dog, hunt, fish, loaf, ugh!"

Evidently he had learned what his paleface brothers called the lazy, lounging manner of living to which Indian braves are accustomed, and which possesses charm for their souls.

To be able to loaf ought to be sufficient inducement to any young chap.

Cuthbert gave it up.

It would be impossible to convince this thick-headed aborigine that he could never be happy under such conditions.

Better save his breath to ask questions of those who might give up a little information to pay him for his pains.

"Where am I to get my breakfast?" he asked, as an after-thought.

The chief pointed to a fire close by, where a fat squaw, evidently Mrs. Standing Elk, was engaged in primitive cooking.

"All right, only be sure and have plenty, for I'm a regular jim-dandy when it comes to making grub disappear."

"You tell um," said the chief, leering, and Cuthbert somehow conceived the idea that perhaps this renowned warrior might stand a little in awe of his better half—such things are rare among the red

men, who usually treat their squaws like slaves, but it might be possible that Standing Elk's spouse had a tongue which gave him some trouble.

Cuthbert knew how to get into the good graces of the other sex, and he went to considerable trouble now to conciliate the buxom squaw, with such success that she was presently beaming upon him indulgently.

He assisted her with the fire, something no boy or man had perhaps ever done before in the whole course of her natural life, to judge from the expression of amazement that first spread over her countenance.

Cuthbert soon came to the conclusion that Indian life was very one-sided—that to the male half fell all the good times, the jolly rides, the fishing and hunting trips, and the frequent spells of sweet idleness, while the women were usually busily engaged cooking, making pemmican, grinding corn or berries in coffee-mills purchased from traders, sewing buckskin, bead-trimmed moccasins, or something of this sort.

Still, they were able to come together and hold conversation while they worked, and this he soon learned was their great privilege.

The dogs of the village were both numerous and ugly. They showed their teeth and growled at the white boy, doubtless looking on him in the light of an intruder, and this became such a nuisance that Cuthbert resolved to put a stop to it.

Accordingly he possessed himself of the first likely-looking cudgel and bided his time.

When a troop of the mangy curs disputed his right to free passage, he bounded into their midst and laid about him with such right good will that a panic ensued.

Such barking and howling as ensued, such a scampering of dogs with tails between their legs; every

inhabitant of the village came out to ascertain what was the matter, and added their whoops and laughter to the din.

Cuthbert had accomplished what he wanted—but he deemed it wise to carry a stick for some little time, lest the dogs rise against him, and by a concerted movement give him trouble.

But they had received a severe lesson and learned to respect his valor.

Wherever he went they snarled, but slunk out of his way.

Heroic measures had accomplished what other means could hardly have done, for these mixed Indian curs do not seem amenable to kindness, having too much of the treacherous wolf strain in their make-up.

That day Cuthbert put in after the manner of an adventurous mariner on a voyage of discovery.

He roamed all about the town, and even its outskirts came under his observation.

Seeing some squaws bearing steaming bowls of food along a trail, he had the curiosity to follow in their wake.

He knew a lounging brave kept an eye on him, to round him up in case he made a break for liberty; but Cuthbert had not the slightest intention of attempting so foolish a move until he could be in better trim to meet the dangers of the prairie.

To his surprise he presently found himself in the cemetery of the village.

Standing Elk's people had evidently been located here for many years, or else this was one of their several village sites, for the burial place of the tribe indicated as much.

First of all Cuthbert saw a circle of white, glistening skulls.

A young squaw was squatted upon the ground fondling one of these relics, crooning tribal songs,

and in every way showing the affection which years had not killed.

And yet, in all probability, her brave had, while in life, treated her harshly, as is their almost universal custom, and even beaten her when he felt particularly ugly.

Perhaps, Cuthbert thought, she loved him more dead than when in the flesh.

Skirting this ring of relics, at irregular intervals he saw elevated platforms, some six or seven feet from the ground, and upon these were lashed the dead, wrapped in many deerskins until they resembled mummies.

Safely out of reach of the wolves, they remained there until time and decay tumbled the supports over and scattered the bones, which were then buried, all save the skull, for which a place was made in the magic ring.

To these platforms bearing recent victims of death's terrors went the squaws whom Cuthbert had followed.

The dish containing hot food was held up so that the steam crept over the platform and, of course, vanished.

This steam, possessing the odor of the viands, was called spirit food, and the poor creatures actually believed it served the soul of the departed on his long journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

It was ludicrous in one way, and yet Cuthbert had a feeling of awe creep over him, such were the gruesome surroundings.

The bowls of food were left on the ground, and no doubt must have been highly enjoyed by the prowling coyotes and wolves always hovering around an Indian burial spot.

It was late in the day, after sunset, when he left the weird cemetery.

Already twilight was stealing over the land, and

several of the boldest wolves raised their melodious voices, as if eager to get at their customary meal.

Cuthbert trod over the rattlesnake weed and wild roses that grew everywhere, heading for the village, where the cheery glow of fires could be seen that told of another meal.

The drowsy chirp of crickets, and the shrill voices of katydids sounded among the wild plum trees and the hazel bushes, telling of the August night and the frost in store.

One thing Cuthbert desired to investigate, and this, chief of all, aroused his curiosity.

It was the weird old medicine man, that worthy who assumes the office of doctor and druggist, as well as oracle, for every tribe—who, by his incantations, appeases the wrath of the Evil Spirit, prophecies coming events, attends to those who are sick, bestows magic talismans on those able to pay for protection, and, in a word, holds the tribe, from the big chief down, in the hollow of his skinny hand.

He is always a keen-witted, unscrupulous rascal, who knows full well how best to play upon the superstitious nature of his fellows, and who can readily manufacture an excuse that sounds reasonable enough whenever one of his prophecies goes wrong.

Cuthbert had never been able to get on visiting terms with the big medicine, when the tribe to which Little Buckshot belonged had taken up temporary quarters in the vicinity of Sunset Ranch.

His ambition was still unsatisfied, and he resolved to make some discoveries in this quarter if the opportunity opened.

He could hear the old fellow holding forth now, beating some sort of tom-tom, now slowly and anon with fierce emphasis, all the while chanting what was doubtless an ode to the departing day, or an invocation to the spirits of the night.

At least the wild, barbaric music seemed just in

keeping with the blinking fires and the dusky figures seen moving among them, the conical, decorated tepees and the strange scene he had just left at the Indian graveyard.

Cuthbert was thrilled with the weirdness surrounding him.

A little of it went a great way.

If he had ever been foolish enough to express a desire to spend some time in an Indian village he regretted it now, and was ready to repent.

His one wish now was to see Sunset Ranch again, and dear old Karl.

He believed he would starve under such cooking as prevailed among the Sioux—true, they had some frying pans and tin kettles, purchased from the settlers with whom they traded pelts, buffalo heads and robes, but the trouble was they failed to use them—a chunk of meat thrust into the fire from the end of a prong of wood answered when there was nothing to boil in the black pot.

So he resolved to do his own cooking in the future, that is, providing the good dame of the chief's household permitted.

Some more diplomacy on his part was needed in order to conciliate the squaw, lest she take offense, womanlike, because her guest failed to appreciate her cooking, for even a poor Sioux housekeeper may have her ideas upon the superiority of her corn-bread over that of her dark-skinned sisters.

It was a feather in his cap that he even accomplished this delicate job.

Standing Elk viewed the whole arrangement with considerable astonishment.

Perhaps he was learning for the first time in his benighted life that there may be other ways to influence the wife of one's bosom to do one's will save that time-honored one of knocking her down first.

And his admiration for the lad increased, since he

had bearded a Tartar in her den and won a place in her regard.

Cuthbert, intent on making the acquaintance of the medicine man, sauntered over to the tepee where he held forth.

It bore hideous character-drawings, done in brilliant colors, and reminded him somewhat of a circus tent.

The old fraud sat in his doorway, smoking.

He looked well satisfied with life, as though things were coming his way and he had no occasion to complain.

At close quarters, Cuthbert discovered him to be a gaunt, ugly chap, who delighted in making himself more hideous even than Nature had done, though, to give her credit, she had certainly attempted her best.

His eye sparkled like that of a massasauga rattlesnake, and his nails were talons, while the liberal daubs of brilliant paint and the colored feathers he carried, gave him a very killing appearance as a venerable seer.

Cuthbert had his course planned.

Soft words had won with the squaw, but would they have any effect upon the steel armor of this suspicious mountebank?

He bowed low before the old fellow and, laying one hand on his breast and with the other removing his cap, he said:

"May I speak with you, oh, sir?"

He found it hard to restrain his mirth as he watched the expression on the medicine man's face from the corner of his eye.

"Speak!" said the old man, grandly flourishing his hand.

"I have heard of your fame," said Cuthbert, truthfully enough, for he was revered by the other In-

dians, "and I almost fear to come into your presence."

"Fear!" repeated the medicine man. "Why for fear me? I no kill. I make well. You un'stand?"

"Yes," answered Cuthbert, "but you are so terrible in appearance, doctor."

The grin on the old man's face became more horrible.

"Ah! me one big terror. So!"

And he threw out his long talons and shook his shaggy mane and banged his instruments.

"Altogether this medicine man is something I wouldn't have missed for a good deal," said Cuthbert to himself.

"I count this," he said aloud, "a proud moment when I can stand in the presence of so renowned a doctor."

Flattery accomplishes wonders in this world, and Cuthbert was really as able to spread it on as though he had been on a trip to Limerick and Blarney Castle.

By degrees he melted the reserve of the big medicine—he praised his appearance, asked many questions that tickled the ancient humbug, and quite won his heart by calling him, as if inadvertently, doctor!

The medicine man felt the high compliment—he knew that among the whites a doctor must be learned in his profession, and is usually looked up to with reverence.

It was a clever inspiration on Cuthbert's part to thus honor one whose whole life had been spent in quackery.

"Ha! White boy know somethings!" said the old medicine man, at last, with a pleased grin. "Ugh! Me like white boy! My little white brother very young. Oh, so very young! But he very wise. Good! White boy come. I show him."

And so speaking, he led Cuthbert into his special audience chamber, where he might, with his own eyes, behold the wonderful array of curiosities he had gathered during his reign, and the clever implements with which he rattled or tooted an evil spirit out of a sick man's body.

That lodge was a sacred place and a fearsome abode in the eyes of all Standing Elk's people; but the white boy strode carelessly in after his guide, with no feeling of awe, only intense curiosity.

Well, it was worth observing.

Cuthbert certainly believed he had never before looked upon so many things calculated to bring a cold chill down one's back—rattlesnakes, stuffed, horned toads, Gila monsters, great staring beetles, necklaces of grizzly bear claws that betokened a great warrior, strings of odd, dried up bunches of hair, which Cuthbert guessed must be hideous mementoes of past battles or butcheries, scalps, in fact—these and many more similar articles formed quite a museum.

It must have shaken the nerves of any brave to find himself surrounded by such a medley, and no doubt the arrant old humbug wondered much because the white boy showed not the slightest symptom of fear.

He must possess a totem or amulet that rendered him impervious to the magic influences which, from long habit, the medicine man actually believed in himself.

Cuthbert had him rattle the hollow gourds and shake the string of rusty sleigh bells which he had in some way picked up.

The cunning old necromancer had in truth been bewitched by a mere lad, and seemed quite ready to stand on his head, if requested.

After all it was not so much a glimpse of his tools in trade Cuthbert desired, but a chance to watch

him drive the evil spirits from the bed of a sick Indian, or execute one of his fantastic dances when the time came for the propitiation of an infuriated god.

Perhaps in time he would even have the good luck to see all this, if he remained in the Sioux village long enough and kept in the favor of the medicine man.

Cuthbert was satisfied with his day's work.

He had learned much and had made friends, two things bound to tell in the end.

Thus several days passed.

Life began to grow monotonous.

A palace is a prison to one who may not pass beyond its portals, and the young fellow, accustomed to liberty in its widest significance, began to feel like a bird that beats its poor head against the bars of its cage.

Now escape began to be ever in his mind—he thought of it night and day.

By slow degrees he began to shape his policy, and all this had to be done without arousing the suspicions of Standing Elk and his clan.

As the evening fell Cuthbert used to repair to a rock near by and gaze sadly in the direction he knew Sunset Ranch must be.

At such a time he was apt to be almost overwhelmed by the intensity of the emotions that swept over him.

Yet, when sauntering into camp soon after, he appeared just as jolly and free from care as ever.

Thus he believed he was quieting the suspicions of his quondam red brothers—at least, they allowed him more liberties, took him bear hunting among the wild passes to the north, where Cuthbert was able to do excellent work with his reliable old Winchester, placed in his hands for this occasion, and in many other ways tried to make him feel that he

was one of them, having been solemnly taken into the tribe with great ceremony.

And so the days glided by, without a sign from Karl and the reckless cowboys of Sunset Ranch, making Cuthbert imagine that if he ever hoped to be free again it must come through his own exertions.

Thus he came face to face with the hour when, as fate decreed, he should learn the true reason of his strange abduction—perhaps it would hurt his conceit somewhat, but at the same time the knowledge must act as a spur upon his resolution to give his new Sioux comrades the slip and take French leave between the setting and the rising of the sun.

CHAPTER XI.

TAKING FRENCH LEAVE.

After all there was some sort of peculiar fascination and charm about this wild life Cuthbert led when among the Sioux.

It seemed to appeal to an element in his nature that must have descended from remote ancestors.

He was fond of the picturesque, and the Indian village, at the hour when the evening meal was being prepared, certainly presented a peculiar scene, with the sparkling fires, the curling, drifting smoke, the gayly-garbed squaws bending low or flitting from lodge to lodge, the gamboling papooses, lads at play, warriors stalking gravely about or smoking serenely beside their tepee, curs barking or rushing hither and yon in packs, and Indian ponies in the stout corral.

Yes, he would remember it all during the remainder of his life.

But all this did not make him change the resolution he had taken.

He yearned for the society of his kind.

"This wild life may be all very well for a time," he said to himself, and then he added, with a smile, "but then one really gets too much of a good thing."

His mind went back to many pleasant episodes in which Karl figured, wild chases over the flowery prairie, the momentous night when Buckskin carried them both to safety, and the river, with the awful fire roaring behind—then once more he experienced in imagination the chilly blast of the blizzard that so nearly terminated Little Buckshot's life.

It was always Karl who was in his mind—Karl, who seemed dearer to him than a brother.

So the days crept on, and Cuthbert began to make secret preparations for quitting the Sioux lodges.

He believed he could comprehend what a task there was set before him.

It might have tried an old ranger like Silas Gregg, let alone a boy who only a year back had been an utter greenhorn.

When his flight should be discovered, doubtless a hot pursuit would be made.

Standing Elk had especially desired Karl for adoption, but he seemed ready to make the best of a bad bargain, and to have contented himself with a lesser light.

Cuthbert had all along been looked upon with jealous eyes by the Indian youths of about his own size and age.

They seemed to think he was a usurper—that he had no business among them, especially in so exalted a position as son and possible heir to the great chief, Standing Elk.

Consequently these dusky lads never lost an opportunity to challenge him to a duel of some sort.

Now it was a contest of skill with the rifle, in which, of course, Cuthbert easily excelled—anon he was called upon to meet the champion wrestler of the youthful tribe, before whom all had gone down as dead grass in the teeth of the prairie fire.

By nature Cuthbert had been endowed with a peculiarly sturdy frame, although he had never reached the perfection of agility and power until he had been coached by Karl, and spent these long months among the cowboys.

He tackled the Indian wrestler, but the redskin's style of fighting, together with his almost naked, slippery figure, baffled the white lad for quite a time, so that they struggled like two cottonwoods shaken by the blasts of winter.

At length, however, Cuthbert managed to dis-

cover the weak point of his adversary, and put him on his back so suddenly that the Indian brave did not know how it was done.

After that he had things his own way, but instead of lording it over his companions, he considered it policy to seek their friendship.

Every day saw some ambitious youngster challenge the intruder to a new test of endurance.

Sometimes these were of a character so utterly unfamiliar to Cuthbert that he lost the first round, but took it good-naturedly, and in the return bout was sure to come out ahead.

Thus he finally came to the conclusion that despite their training from infancy, the young Sioux braves were not equal man for man to many tough cowboys he knew, and that the Indian race was far inferior as a whole to the white in physical as well as mental calibre.

He began to despair of gaining their good will.

An Indian finds it hard to forgive one who has humiliated him.

These successive victories cost him friends, since each defeated competitor nursed the savage desire for revenge.

In time Cuthbert would doubtless have had trouble with these fellows, eager to bring about his downfall; but the drama was hastened to a conclusion by other events that had not been down upon the programme.

The fact that he was more or less spied upon by some of these disgruntled boys made the task he had set for himself the more difficult.

They were apt to discover what he had in mind, and disclose the whole thing to the chief.

If Standing Elk learned of his secret preparations for flight, the game would be up.

His privileges would be curtailed, and they would make him a prisoner in truth.

Accordingly, Cuthbert became very cautious in all his work looking toward flight.

He knew his best hope lay in a good horse and a fair start.

The river was friendly enough, and the bull boats of the Sioux, made of buffalo hide, seemed inviting a ready escape, but this method was too slow, and the chances greatly in favor of his being intercepted by fleet horsemen, who could go four miles to his one, and thus patrol the lower reaches of the river.

It must be as he came—on horseback.

And Buckskin was the animal he selected to carry out that part of the scheme.

Had he not seen the broncho tested under the most adverse circumstances, and seldom with the shadow of defeat upon his proud record?

Yes, Buckskin was the first choice.

The animal had never gotten over his singular animosity toward redskins in general, and was detested as well as feared by the Sioux, toward whom he showed a vicious temper.

A number had tried to tame him, but with meagre success, and always with bruises and contusions galore among themselves.

Probably the gallant little buckskin nag would have been killed ere now only that Standing Elk took him under his wing.

Perhaps he really admired the tawny beast, or else his stubborn grit appealed to the innate chivalry of the chief.

Cuthbert was secretly inclined to believe that Standing Elk still clung to the hope of some day securing Karl, the lad who he fancied resembled his dead son, and that he had an idea the fact of this horse being in the hands of the Sioux might sooner or later draw the cowboy thither—in his mind, it was a connecting link.

Matters were running along in this groove when a sudden change occurred that forced Cuthbert's hand, and made him adopt stern measures before the time he had set for the carrying out of his plan.

The cool breath of early fall was in the air.

Already advance couriers of the frost king had breathed upon certain sensitive trees and plants, causing their leaves to turn crimson or a bright golden.

It was a time when the heat of summer having passed away, one felt strong and invigorated, capable of accomplishing great things.

Cuthbert, by chance, was at the corral petting poor lonely Buckskin, who seemed to miss Karl, his young master, so much, feeding him with some choice bits of grass, and whispering to him of the time soon coming when the long pent-up powers of the broncho would be put to the most severe test of his life, in order to carry Karl's chum to safety.

A commotion on the border of the village attracted his attention, and looking in that direction, he discovered quite a squad of Indians entering camp.

At every step their numbers were augmented by recruits from the village, who added their voices to the clamor.

Not to be outdone, the pariah dogs barked and howled, horses neighed, and, taken in all, the hubbub equaled that which greeted the party returning with the horses stolen from Sunset Ranch at the time he himself was made a prisoner.

There were no horses, no cattle being driven or dragged now, but in the midst of the band he discovered one who wore the well-known garb of a cowboy.

Another prisoner, Cuthbert thought, and his heart beat like a trip-hammer when he remembered Karl,

whom the chief desired to secure. Was it his friend, his more than brother?

Buckskin was forgotten.

He left the corral instantly and zigzagged across the intervening space, taking advantage of several tepees on the way.

All the while his heart was in his throat, so to speak, while his eyes remained glued upon the figure riding amidst the returning braves.

The opportunity for which he yearned came at last, and he discovered that the newcomer was not Karl after all.

Cuthbert hardly knew whether joy or grief predominated in his heart—although he would have been sorry to have seen his friend a captive, still he must have experienced a fierce satisfaction at being thus reunited to him, even under such peculiar conditions.

Looking again, he recognized the newcomer as one of Kelly's rough riders, a man of middle age, Caleb Cross by name.

Somehow Cuthbert had never fancied this man.

He was a good cowboy, valuable on the range, and a man who lived within himself, moody and taciturn.

Perhaps this disposition was what soured the boy with Caleb—as a general thing cowboys and herders are a cheerful, social set, so that such a man makes few friends among them.

To Cuthbert he seemed a man with a history, whose melancholy thoughts had to deal with tragedies of the past.

At first his presence aroused keen hopes.

Surely it indicated the presence of a friendly force somewhere in the neighborhood.

At last, after these weary weeks, Kelly's men had struck the right trail and might soon be in substantial evidence.

It was a pleasant thought, but Cuthbert did not have much opportunity to take consolation from it.

He suddenly became aware of the fact that the cowboy did not look or act dejected—his manner, instead of crestfallen, appeared to be jaunty, as though he were glad to be there.

Cuthbert was surprised, but his feelings grew even stronger when he saw Caleb Cross meet old Standing Elk as though they were friends of long standing.

One last dim hope flashed feebly up—had Caleb, presuming upon some past friendship between the old chief and himself, entered the Sioux village with the idea of negotiating for his release?

This thought died almost instantly. He did not believe the man one to take any trouble or risk unless he could see a way clear to lining well his pockets.

Cuthbert seemed to feel the shadow of some coming disaster—to realize that in some way not yet clear this visit of Caleb Cross had to do with his own detention there.

He believed portentous events hung in the air, which concerned his own interests.

So he kept back and watched all that went on.

Apparently the crabbed cowboy could be genial enough when he chose to let down the gates, as was the case when he met Standing Elk.

They beamed on each other and talked in low tones, as though business of great importance was demanding their attention.

What could the Sioux chief and one of Kelly's cow punchers have in common?

Could it be Cross was a traitor and in league with these notorious cattle thieves, eager to put them in possession of facts that would make easier the next raid that brought them swooping down from their secret fastness in the north?

Cuthbert shook his head in dismay at the task of guessing the truth.

He knew a better way.

Night was creeping on, the shades of darkness had already started to cover the earth, and in a short time he could carry out his little design without fear of discovery.

This was nothing more nor less than to steal a march upon his adopted father the big chief, and listen to some of his interesting conversation with Caleb Cross.

Cuthbert had been an apt scholar while among the Indians, and was able to do himself proud upon this occasion, when so much depended upon his success.

The shadows were friendly and screened him from observation, so that, after much squirming after the manner of a snake, he was enabled to get close up behind the tepee of the chief.

From within came the low murmur of conversation, as Standing Elk and his guest chatted together, while the squaw outside prepared the evening meal.

Cuthbert's hearing was fairly good under ordinary conditions, but it was rendered extraordinarily acute by the circumstances surrounding him just then.

His reward came speedily enough, and in the nature of a staggering surprise.

To Caleb Cross, then, he owed the fact of his being a prisoner in the Sioux camp.

That worthy, believing the stories floating about among the cowboys of Kelly's ranch concerning the wealth which belonged to Cuthbert in Virginia and New York, had conceived the idea of making him a prisoner among the Indians and holding him there an indefinite time pending a healthy ransom.

It was simply disgusting—a miserable money-

making scheme after all, and sentiment had no part in it at all.

Standing Elk looked upon the white lad he had adopted merely as representing so much tobacco and fire water when the day of final settlement arrived.

Cuthbert was conscious of a sudden rise in his temperature when he heard enough to disclose these facts—indeed, as he himself phrased it, he “was hot under the collar.”

His indignation fell principally on the cowboy.

Certainly Caleb Cross deserved the summary punishment he would surely receive should the truth ever become known to his fellow-laborers of Sunset Ranch.

It made the boy feel cheap to think he had become the victim of such a very ancient scheme. Why, it was as old as the hills, and had been played with more or less success these centuries back!

One thing was sure—given half a chance and he would disappoint these brave chaps most grievously—why delay, when different measures might now be taken for the safe keeping of the lad who represented a fortune?

Yes, circumstances over which he had no control had forced his hand.

He must cut the Gordian knot, must leave the quaint old Sioux village, sever his relations with that prince of quacks, the medicine man, and make tracks for Sunset Ranch.

The sooner the better.

Why not this night?

What a thrill the proposition gave him; but after he had carefully considered matters it became manifest that a better opportunity would not likely arise, and the chances were, his freedom being curtailed, he might find it much harder in the future to accomplish the task.

That settled it.

To-night, then, he would, like the Arab, "fold his tent and silently steal away."

Cuthbert would possibly have enjoyed hearing more of the interesting conversation between the two trick conspirators, but he felt that time was too valuable just now to spend any more of it there.

Besides, there was always more or less chance that discovery might come.

Accordingly, he moved away in much the same style as he had advanced.

There was a great deal to be done if he expected to quit the Sioux village in the manner he had planned.

First, he must secure his Winchester rifle and what cartridges remained, for Cuthbert knew the perils that might beset him on the great lonely wastes, and would have hesitated to accept his freedom at the expense of going over that long route defenseless.

It was in the keeping of the old medicine man, and Cuthbert had frequently borrowed it for hunting purposes, a supply of cartridges having turned up among other things stowed away in that wonderful lodge of necromancy.

He found the "doctor," as usual, at home, and fancied the old fellow's beady eyes were a trifle more piercing than ordinary when he placed the gun in his hand.

The belt, too, was completely filled with shells, a circumstance that made Cuthbert wonder if his old friend half suspected the truth.

All doubt was dispelled when at parting the medicine man gripped his hand and uttered some magic words, as though he would invoke success upon his mission.

After all, he was a rare old fraud, and Cuthbert would long remember his friendly ways—what fruit had sprung from his flattering designation of the

ancient quack as a "doctor"—surely it pays to make friends, even with the wizard of a Sioux village.

The gun and belt he secreted in a hollow tree, which already served him as a storehouse, wherein at intervals he had deposited such food as dried deer and buffalo meat, to serve him on his expected journey.

The task that next must engage his attention was the securing of his mount.

Buckskin must be secretly taken from the corral, and hidden in the woods.

This, however, could not be accomplished until the village was wrapped in slumber.

He came in late to supper, and purposely avoided the chief's tepee, where the cowboy still sat, in deep consultation with his willing ally.

No doubt it was intended that on the morrow the true state of affairs should be broken to the boy, and the first step taken looking toward the realization of their wonderful plans.

Cuthbert grimly determined that when that morrow came he would be many miles on the road to Sunset Ranch, and hummed to himself: "'They have fleet steeds who follow,' quoth young Lochinvar."

Somehow the anticipation of what lay in store for him aroused Cuthbert's dormant ambition, and he actually quivered with the eager thought of pitting his boyish powers against the much-vaunted prowess of these dusky sons of the wilderness.

Standing Elk came several times out of his tepee and looked toward where Cuthbert wrestled with the Indian lads, teaching them some of the tricks he had picked up from the cow punchers and herders, among whom was a professional boxer.

Cuthbert dreaded lest the old chief should demand his presence, and an explosion follow, after which

his liberty might be abridged; but, greatly to his satisfaction, this did not occur.

Hope grew stronger in his heart.

At least he would be given a chance.

If the effort turned out a dismal failure, he could always feel that he had done his best.

The minutes dragged.

Really, never in all his life had a space of sixty seconds seemed so long to him.

Would the village never grow quiet?

It appeared that the youngsters were in an unusually frolicsome mood, as though especially desirous of exasperating him, while the braves sat around the various fires, smoking and recounting past valorous deeds, as if sleep had no charms for them.

Cuthbert grew uneasy.

In another hour or so the moon would be peeping up, and he knew his difficulties in quitting the village must be doubled under such circumstances.

Jealously he watched them disappear, one by one, until finally only a few remained to fix the fires for the night, when the encampment would be left to the hosts of canines that roamed about, snarling at each other and occasionally using their sharp teeth to advantage, as if to prove their wolf blood.

It was time.

Cuthbert's heart beat somewhat faster than usual as he arose to his feet, sauntered over to a spot where the shadows lay heavily, and then threw himself again on the ground, as if to sleep, though his watchful eyes were fully alive to all that was going on around.

There was nothing to indicate that he had been observed, and presently he made another move, this time slinking out of the village on the side where the corral was located.

The horse first, then his traps, the gun and food, for without Buckskin these things counted naught.

Now he was alongside the wooden rails that formed the barrier between the herd and the Indian ponies and freedom.

A wild thought flashed into his mind as to what a glorious thing it would prove for him to cut off pursuit by stampeding the whole herd, but common sense showed him what a foolhardy move this would be, and how greatly it might jeopardize the successful carrying out of his main chance, so he put away the temptation as sternly as possible.

Karl had established a telegraphic communication with his horse, and, of course, Cuthbert had made it a point to practice the signals, under the belief that sooner or later they would prove of value to him.

That time had come.

He knew that ordinarily one or more videttes kept watch and ward over the Sioux village and precious corral, while the camp was wrapped in slumber, and from this source his greatest danger proceeded.

It was easy to find the gate of the stockade.

All seemed quiet—the horses were moving about within, the night breeze rustled through the trees, but Cuthbert could not detect any sign of a vidette near by.

Creeping through the bars he gave utterance to a low, tremulous whistle.

Buckskin would know it instantly if he heard, and his natural sagacity must bring him to the spot where Cuthbert stood.

There being no immediate response, he repeated the signal, this time in a louder key, though fearful lest it might reach the ear of a wakeful vidette.

Was that whinny Buckskin's recognition?

His heart seemed in his throat, so great the anxiety that nearly overwhelmed him.

Now he could catch the sound of hoof strokes ap-

proaching, and gave forth the same tremulous whistle to guide the animal to his side.

Another moment and he was fondly stroking Buckskin's velvety muzzle, and feeling the intelligent beast's welcome.

No time was to be lost.

A rope hackamore must do duty in lieu of a bridle, a blanket for a saddle—these things Cuthbert had brought with him, in order to meet the emergency.

Then the bars were let down.

Gently Buckskin stepped outside.

He seemed to recognize that some important business was on foot which required secrecy, for by no neigh or snort did he betray the satisfaction he must have felt at thus securing his freedom.

The bars replaced, Cuthbert started to lead his prize away.

His ambition, of course, was to reach the spot where his cache lay, to secure what stores he had secreted and then decamp.

So many times had he gone over this line of retreat that every foot of ground from the horse corral to the hollow tree was as familiar to him as though it were broad midday.

Every yard increased his chances of safety.

The smouldering fires of the village began to be obscured by the trees, showing that he had succeeded in rounding the spur that jutted out toward the woods.

His heart had been beating wildly, but now it began to resume its normal function, since the worst had passed by.

The village fires had become like huge glow-worms in the distance, and it seemed to Cuthbert's sensitive soul as though his old friend, a great owl, perched in a tree near by, sentinel of the night, were crooning a dismal and perpetual farewell, as he muttered his discontented notes.

It was a period of time fraught with intense solitude, and which he could never forget so long as he lived—these halcyon memories of his brief stay among the mysterious red people of the wilderness would haunt him ever.

And now it was all over. He was launched upon his new voyage, which must end, he fondly hoped, with his restoration to Sunset Ranch, to Karl and to—Polly—for surely the girl had been often in his mind during these days of his captivity, and Cuthbert knew she had become as dear to him as a sister.

He was determined that could he gain her consent and that of her protectors, the genial Kellys, she would occupy that position—if he could not find Hildegard Gordon, his cousin, there was no reason why this dainty girl should not occupy her place, and share his bounty.

When finally he drew up at the gnarled tree in the hollow of which his limited stores were secreted, he believed every chance was within his grasp.

Quickly, then, he proceeded to secure his little all to the back of the horse. As it was made up in something the shape of two saddlebags, in anticipation of just such an emergency, this was not a difficult task.

He was just testing the cords or thongs with which this had been carried into effect, when he heard a peculiar grunt close beside him, and in the dim starlight beheld a human figure rise out of the brush.

His first thought was that the game was up, or at least in a perilous position, since this must be one of the Sioux videttes, and if he escaped to start on his long journey, it could only be after a successful contest with this muscular brave, who would endeavor to hold him fast until assistance arrived from the village.

And as he endeavored to get himself in a position of defense, his trembling finger fumbling with the lock of his gun, he heard his Sioux name pronounced in caressing accents.

Why, it was the old medicine man after all!

"White boy go away?" he said, in a crooning, mournful key. "'Doctor' he very sorry. Little white brother go. Never see him more?"

"Why, doctor, you here! You're not going to give the warning?"

"Ugh! Me no do that. Help you instead. See here. Knife. No use, mebbe? White boy wise. Will know if good to have. See! Cartridges, too."

And the old fellow produced a very businesslike knife and a bag of cartridges.

Warmly Cuthbert embraced the fantastically-dressed old humbug—there was some good in the Sioux blood after all—at least Little Buckshot and this ancient wizard had risen above the hatred of their race for the white man.

So Cuthbert, with one last warm word of farewell, mounted his horse and rode slowly away to the dim southland, Buckskin stepping so lightly that there was no danger of hostile ears catching the sound of his hoof stroke.

In long years to come the boy, grown a man, with world-wide experience, would always keep a corner in his heart green to the memory of the Sioux medicine man, whose weird costumes and fantastic dances must fill a unique niche in his heart until time should be no more.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER THE WANING MOON.

The task that the young Virginian had set himself was no light one.

A journey lay before him of several days' duration, and unknown perils might beset him on every hand.

There were his late friends, the Sioux, whom he expected to make a hasty and hot pursuit.

Standing Elk's affection he had little faith in; but the white lad represented a winter's supply of tobacco, ammunition and fire water, which, in the eyes of an Indian, counted for much, so that the old chief might be expected to strain every nerve in the endeavor to recapture such a prize.

Then there were wild beasts with which he might come in contact, or, worse still, some of those desperadoes always to be found prowling about the outskirts of civilization, to whom the newly-discovered gold fields among the Black Hills would serve as a lodestone, drawing them from other less-favored communities.

Still, Cuthbert's heart seemed stout enough to meet and overcome all these difficulties. The success attending his start gave him courage.

Besides, a cowboy always feels fortified against evil and disaster so long as he can press his knees against the sides of a stanch and faithful broncho; so often has he to depend upon this four-footed friend for his safety that there seems to be magic in the very contact.

Once a mile and more from the Sioux village and free from timber, the runaway put his horse into the broken country that lay to the south.

The moon had now arisen at midnight, a battered

specimen at the best, but, to the fleeing lad, any assistance was welcome, and this meagre illumination would allow him to see obstacles in his way more clearly.

One thing gave him cause for uneasiness.

At the time of his flight a hunting party had been absent from the village of the Sioux.

These braves, more than a dozen in number, had gone south a week before, in the hope of striking one of the few herds of bison that remained of the countless numbers that had, a decade before, dotted the great prairie; or, failing in that, to make way with some beef on the hoof that would serve to keep the village supplied with provisions during the approaching winter.

This party was doubtless on the way home, and directly in the path he would take if he made a bee line for Sunset Ranch.

It was policy, therefore, to deviate from this straight course, as the crow flies, and make something of a detour, in the hope of avoiding these braves.

Of course, should they chance upon him, the truth must be immediately apparent to them, and Cuthbert's hopes receive a decided setback.

He gloried in every mile placed between himself and the Indian village.

Meanwhile, he amused himself by speculating as to when and under what conditions his late red brothers would discover his flight.

This awoke a flood of recollections.

He was vehement in affirming his great joy at leaving the scene of his late captivity; and yet, strange to say, there was a little regret mingled with this exuberance—some associations he had formed that would give him pleasure as they arose in memory.

As he journeyed on, Cuthbert found he must meet and fight another adversary.

This was the dragon, sleep.

He had had broken slumbers of late from various causes, and nature began to endeavor to overwhelm him.

So he resorted to several expedients in order to successfully combat this insidious enemy.

All the while Buckskin was making good headway, like the faithful old chap he was, apparently realizing what game he was concerned in, and eager to gain an advantage over the heathen whom he despised so cordially.

Thus the night was slipping away.

Cuthbert did not intend resting until morning came, when both himself and his steed would deserve refreshment.

Perhaps the eager Sioux were already on the track, bent upon running him to earth. No matter, his course had been mapped out, and he did not mean to be driven from it, unless the necessity became very great.

The gray dawn came.

In the east the sky showed signs of the sun's coming, and Cuthbert knew he had put leagues between himself and the Sioux village.

He gloried in the coming of the day god.

Not alone because he was weary and hungry, both of which were true enough, but, in the small hours of the night, the temperature had grown exceptionally chilly, especially to a mounted traveler, rather scantily clothed, so that, in spite of his effort to imagine himself fairly comfortable, his chattering teeth and an occasional shudder of his frame belied the cheat.

The sounds of the late summer night died away; long since the howl of the wolf and bark of the sneaking coyote had ceased, and now the burr of the

cricket, together with the shrill complaining of katydids in the brush, gave place to silence deep and profound.

Thus the mighty king of day wheeled into view above the horizon.

It was well.

Cuthbert's anxiety concerning the hunting party had not abated.

The first use he made of daylight was to survey the country all around him.

He had just reached that border where the rough foothills gradually softened into the rolling prairie.

During the whole term of his captivity, he had not once clapped eyes on this latter, and was surprised to find how dear it had become to him since his advent among the cowboys, now two seasons back.

It was like welcoming an old friend again, and seemed to speak in clarion tones of the proud liberty he had once enjoyed.

Why, it even seemed easier to breathe here than among those hills where the lodges of Standing Elk kept guard beside the ever-flowing Sweetwater.

When he had dismounted in a depression, and hobbled Buckskin so the broncho might play no tricks common to his class upon him, Cuthbert topped the nearest rise, and took a good survey of the scene in every direction.

He rejoiced to discover no signs of danger, for his weariness was such that only urgent necessity would have compelled him to go on.

Then came a frugal repast.

He had a supply of water in a canteen, secured through diplomacy from a young buck, who had taken it from one of Custer's unlucky cavalymen at the battle of the Little Big Horn.

The ride of almost six consecutive hours had been wearisome, much more so because of his lack of

proper equipments—for a white man can never do full justice to himself on a bareback horse, when accustomed to saddle and stirrups.

Stretching himself at full length, the cowboy munched his dried meat and took copious draughts of the cooling liquid contained in the canteen—which relic of the dread disaster had at length fallen into hands capable of appreciating its good qualities.

Thus half an hour passed.

Cuthbert felt refreshed.

The fearful sensation of sleepiness seemed to have passed away.

He knew it would not be wise to give way to such a natural desire, since, once slumber took hold upon him, who could say when he would awaken again, and then it might only be to look into the grinning countenance of Standing Elk.

Cuthbert remembered the old story of the race between the hare and the tortoise—a nap had been fatal to the chances of the former, and he did not want the experience repeated in his case.

With a groan, therefore, he struggled to his feet, and was surprised to find that his knees were quite stiff, the result of digging them into Buckskin's sides for hours, in lieu of the support which stirrups would have given.

Never mind; once he gave his pursuers the slip, and Sunset Ranch was reached, he would have plenty of opportunities to recuperate, and, ere long, the things that loomed up before him now as dread obstacles would appear like trifles light as air.

Perhaps, ere mounting Buckskin again and setting forth on his journey, it might be the part of wisdom to once more top the rise near by, so as to take a last survey.

This was a chance shot, but Cuthbert presently discovered reasons for believing it to be the best thing he had done in many a day.

For hardly had he commenced to cast his eyes about than he discovered something that caused him to fall flat on his face, while his heart beat like a trip-hammer.

Not more than a quarter of a mile away a small column of light smoke arose from a depression in the prairie, proving that some campers must have been located there during the night.

Cuthbert could guess who they were.

As a usual thing, Indians manage to build their fires without visible smoke when in an enemy's country, but these braves had grown reckless, being so near home, and used none of the ordinary precautions.

Greatly worried by their proximity, Cuthbert ran to his horse and arranged things for an immediate flight.

He could pass along the depression for a short distance, when it gradually merged into the level, so that further progress without discovery was out of the question.

All he could do now was to wait and hope for the best.

If these campers proved to be the hunting party homeward bound, as he suspected, they had plenty of room to make for the hills without discovering either him or his horse.

Indeed, only through some direct irony of fate could such an accident occur.

Cuthbert, having all arranged and his horse staked close at hand, once more climbed to the top of the little knoll.

Immediately he saw that he had hit the nail directly on the head when reaching the conclusion that Indians built the fire, for they were now in sight.

A start was about to be made on the last stretch, with the expectation of bringing up in the home village by noon.

At last they went stringing out over the rolling ground, keeping to the ridges for the best riding.

Cuthbert saw they had bundles upon their pack animals; evidently the hunt had been at least fairly successful, and they were now returning, laden with the spoils of the chase.

He counted them as they strung out—a good baker's dozen in all, sturdy warriors, most of whom had already won renown in war or along the hunting trail.

Every second took the dangerous lot farther away, and, unless some unforeseen accident betrayed his presence to them, the chances seemed bright for his escaping scot free.

He had been fearful when wretched Buckskin, as if scenting the presence of his kind near by, had given vent to a shrill neigh, for one of the Indians stopped to look around.

A second neigh would have given the whole thing away, but, fortunately, Buckskin had the decency to stop right there, and the warrior, as if doubting his hearing, cantered on to catch up with his fellows.

Cuthbert recovered from his fright and began to breathe easy again.

It had been a close shave, however, and one he would not care to repeat.

Long he looked after the retreating figures of the bronzed hunters, whose feathered headpieces nodded and glowed in the bright light of the early sun.

In the exuberance of his delight, half raising himself from the grass, he sent mocking kisses after them with his finger tips, at the same time muttering, joyfully:

“Good-day to you, Mr. Crow Quill Moccasin, and you, also, Gray Wolf and Stick-in-His-Hand. A pleasant journey to your lodges, and give my regards to the dear old medicine man humbug, ditto poor, bereft Standing Elk, a second time childless,

and not forgetting that prince of rogues, Caleb Cross, whom Satan help if he ever comes back to Sunset Ranch and the boys' clutches. Why, hello!"

This second exclamation was uttered in a tone of voice quite different from that in which he spoke the rest of his soliloquy.

It indicated surprise—a sudden apprehension.

For the whole hunting party had come to an abrupt halt about a mile away.

The first thought that entered Cuthbert's head was that they were debating as to the choice of routes, one being shorter, but more difficult, than the other.

Then he realized it must be something of an entirely different nature, since several of the Sioux had vaulted from their ponies, and seemed to be searching for some lost article amid the short grass.

Even as yet Cuthbert only growled at the delay as serving to keep him there, when he so ardently desired to push on.

What could they have lost that was of so precious a nature as to cause the whole troop such a period of delay?

For the life of him, he could not guess.

Perhaps it was the last scare he might have; after this clear sailing awaited him.

Ah! what did that fellow mean by pointing straight in his direction?

Sure enough, it was the identical sharp-eared chap who had looked so suspiciously in his quarter at the time Buckskin relieved himself of that treacherous neigh.

Then it all burst like a thunderbolt from a clear sky upon Cuthbert.

They had, by a disgusting piece of ill luck, chanced upon his trail—he remembered he had skimmed along that ridge ere making for the depression where he took his rest.

Indians are ever suspicious, and can read signs in a manner little short of miraculous.

Perhaps there may have been some peculiarity about the buckskin broncho's hoofs that was known to one among their number.

At any rate, suspicion was rampant, and it began to look as though the fugitive from Standing Elk's lodge might be compelled to mount Buckskin and show a clean pair of heels to his pursuers.

Mechanically, then, Cuthbert twisted his head and looked around to see in how many jumps he could clear the intervening space, should the necessity arrive for such action.

When he turned his head again, he found that already a change had taken place among the Sioux braves.

Three of them—one of whom was the suspicious party—had debouched from the rest and were urging their ponies straight for the spot where the white lad lay, while the balance threw a leg across their mounts and curiously awaited the result.

Well, there was only one thing to do—fight or run away.

Cuthbert was no Don Quixote, and had not the remotest idea of attempting to cope with a baker's dozen of experienced braves.

Why, they would overwhelm him without much ado, despite the repeating gun he carried, using their running ponies as shelter while they circled closer and closer around, after the usual manner of their wary species.

Then it was flight.

And the sooner he was off the better, since these fellows were quickly shortening the distance separating them.

He got over to where Buckskin stood in "two shakes of a sheep's tail," as he afterward declared, in relating the adventure.

One pull at the rope left the horse as free as air.

Then came a leap such as only a cowboy can give, and he was astride the broncho.

"Away, old fellow, and do your prettiest if you ever hope to see Karl again," he said.

Buckskin started.

The rest had renewed his zeal, and he seemed to be as fresh as a daisy just plucked.

Cuthbert, with the intention of delaying the final discovery as long as possible, kept to the depression; instinctively he also flattened himself out over the horse's neck in order to baffle the advancing redskins, who might, for a time, think he was an old prairie ranger, or, perhaps, a warrior of some other tribe.

When a resonant shout burst out in his rear, taken up by the rest of the band, he knew his presence was no longer a mystery, and that in all probability the whole outfit was in hot chase.

"Now, go it, old Buckskin, and don't ever have it said an Indian pony bested you on your native heath. He'll wear who wins," said the boy, as he dug both heels into the broncho's ribs.

CHAPTER XIII.

BRAVO! BUCKSKIN.

Cuthbert could not refrain from turning in his seat and taking one backward look.

The sight that met his eyes was stirring enough in all conscience; there were the Indians strung out in a series of little knots, each brave occupying a position in accordance with the ability of his cayuse, and belaboring the ponies with heels and fists in the endeavor to force them to greater exertions.

Of course, the fleeing lad did not believe his life was in peril, since these warriors, knowing the value put upon him by the big chief would deem it their duty to carry him in triumph back to the village.

All the same, the situation was exciting, and aroused anew in Cuthbert's heart that desire for freedom he had nourished secretly from the day he found himself a prisoner.

He had great hopes in Buckskin; the faithful nag had never yet failed Karl, and there was good reason to believe he would exert himself quite as heartily in the favor of his master's mate.

To be sure, he was weary from an all-night gallop, but, while the Indian ponies were fresh, they carried loads of meat that, in addition to their riders, served to counteract this apparent advantage.

The question, then, was an open one.

When Cuthbert found he was holding his own fairly well, his spirits became more buoyant.

There was, after all, a wild exhilaration in this mad ride, a something that made his whole frame tingle as if in contact with a galvanic battery—the cool morning air, the scented breeze blowing to his nostrils, the well-remembered odors of his beloved

prairie, the familiar scene, and, above all, the consciousness that with every jump of his horse he was shortening the distance between himself and Sunset Ranch—the goal of his hopes. All these things combined to arouse his spirits until he found himself with hand in the air, shouting a defiance to those eager pursuers thundering in his rear.

It was the answer of the undismayed white man to the challenge of the untutored Mr. Lo.

The buckskin horse was doing nobly, and even the best of his pursuers did not seem to gain perceptibly, so that it was, after all, pretty much a question of endurance.

Had the Sioux hunters thought it worth while to toss aside the plunder with which their ponies were fairly well laden, they might have made better progress.

Doubtless they had experienced too many vicissitudes of fortune in securing this generous supply of meat to dream of sacrificing it for a miserable pale-face cow puncher, who had in some mysterious manner gained the good will of their old chief.

As he hustled along in this fashion, Cuthbert kept a keen lookout ahead.

There was always a chance of his falling in with some freighter caravan, bound for the new mines.

How welcome a sight to him would be the familiar string of creaking white-topped wagons, drawn by mules, and the rough "mule skinner" on the seat, cracking his long, writhing blacksnake whip; for, among these pioneers of the Black Hills trail, he would assuredly find shelter and safety.

Alas! look as he might whenever an opportunity presented itself, he could not catch even the faintest glimpse of such a welcome sight.

One thing pleased him.

His pursuers were gradually dropping out of the race as their ponies fell behind.

Only seven kept it up, and they seemed to be determined that nothing should daunt them.

Higher rose the sun.

The chill of early morning no longer remained; indeed, Buckskin was bathed in sweat, such was the violence of his exertions.

He was a game little Tartar, well worthy of any man's regard, and Cuthbert, overwhelmed with admiration for his staying qualities, could only express his feelings by patting his outstretched neck and crying in boyish enthusiasm:

"Bully, bully all around!"

That meant volumes, according to a boy's lingo.

Now he began to speculate seriously as to what chances he would have should the affair terminate, as seemed possible, in a battle.

Seven was not so bad as thirteen, but all the same he feared his case was pretty desperate when it came to such a pass.

The repeating gun was a Gibraltar of strength under ordinary conditions, and with open foes to contend against; but Cuthbert had not lived all this time among the Sioux without observing how catlike their advance upon expected quarry might be, and he despaired of successfully holding such agile foes at bay.

One he might have outwitted, and even two in a pinch; but the thought of seven was appalling.

Still he did not yet lose heart.

The yellow horse was putting in his best strides, and, so long as he could keep up this hot pace, the game was anybody's.

More than a few times the course was changed on account of some advantage Cuthbert thought might be gained by a sudden turn; or it was the warning gopher whistle that told him to beware of the burrow city into which his animal might flounder unless guided elsewhere.

Over the wild barley, leaping the tufted patches of buffalo grass, through the rattlesnake weed that rustled with the approach of autumn's chill breath—always onward with those yelling rascals in full chase, Buckskin kept up the mad pace.

Ah! the yellow nag did himself proud on that day, and Cuthbert was forcibly reminded of the time when he and Karl were carried to safety and the cooling waters of the river, with the prairie fire raging at their backs.

As never before he realized what a blessed thing it was to bestride a horse of kingly blood, capable of making such extraordinary exertions when the occasion demanded.

The excitement was still in his veins.

Even putting aside the miserable fate that awaited him if overhauled and taken back to the Indian village a dejected prisoner, Cuthbert burned to come out victor in the race on its own merits.

He had not forgotten the sensation of pride and glory that swept over him when his chum, on this same little horse, won from the boasting Sioux braves on the former occasion, and Cuthbert yearned to have victory placed to his own credit.

The old pride of Virginia, mother of Presidents, not to be outdone, was showing itself.

How indefatigable those grim pursuers seemed to be.

Never before had Cuthbert realized how men could partake of the nature of the wolves they chased over the prairie; these warriors had won their spurs—their right to wear the feathers of braves—by just such tactics as these, and he could not hope to throw them off the scent, except by superior running.

Alas! his weary horse was taken at a decided disadvantage, and had already reached his limit.

Presently his furious pace must slacken as his

proud will failed to enthuse his muscles, and then, yard by yard, those dusky pursuers would shorten the gap.

What then?

Cuthbert was but a boy; had it been Old Sile with that wonderful repeating rifle, the Sioux hunting party might have gone back to their lodges in mourning, but the young Virginian had never mastered the art of successfully shooting from the back of a galloping horse, especially when the quarry was in the rear.

He made one attempt, hoping to at least demoralize the enemy; but, to his disgust, each and every man threw himself flat along his pony's back, and derisive yells greeted his random shot.

About this time the boy began to notice, to his dismay, that poor Buckskin was failing to hold his own.

It was no sudden spurt on the part of those hard riders who whooped along in his rear, but a falling off in his own animal's speed.

Well, the crisis must soon come.

How would he meet it?

He had been so occupied by this dilemma and the endeavor to make some use of his gun that of late he failed to search for traces of others upon the swelling prairie.

It was, therefore, something in the nature of a shock when to his ears was borne a faint, shouting chorus.

How well he knew the cry! What familiar scenes it aroused in his mind.

Eagerly he looked to windward, for the cheering sound undoubtedly came from that quarter.

At first nothing met his eye but the vast expanse, bounded by the horizon.

Then up from a depression came moving objects. They were cowboys, waving hats and guns, and

urging their worn cayuses to the top of their speed, eager to have a hand in the disturbance.

A wild joy thrilled Cuthbert.

He knew he was saved.

Even old Buckskin let out the last kink and bravely held his own temporarily—another five miles must have killed the lion-hearted little beast.

But there was no need.

The Indians, wild with disappointment at losing in the hour of their seeming triumph, made a last desperate effort to overtake the plucky lad.

It was in vain.

Buckskin was too game a nag to lose the race on the homestretch; he would have broken his heart sooner than allow that.

Realizing the hopelessness of their cause, and having a healthy respect for the fighting qualities of the cow punchers, they determined to quit the chase while there was yet time.

In their sullen rage they forgot that old Standing Elk desired the boy unharmed, and let fly a scattering volley of missiles from the various firearms in their possession.

Cuthbert, however, was uninjured.

He had been quick to profit by the lesson they taught when he sought to get in a shot, and no sooner did the first report strike his ears than he threw himself forward and hugged the flowing mane of Buckskin.

Again he experienced that creepy sensation as he heard the queer sounds produced by the leaden pellets cutting the air above him, and realized that they were meant for his body.

When the rattling fusillade ended, and he dared look back, he saw to his satisfaction that the bold Indian braves had turned tail and were in full retreat.

It was a glorious sight, and Cuthbert brought the

exhausted Buckskin to a speedy halt, after which he sprang to the ground.

His first emotion was gratitude toward the faithful creature that, laboring under such serious disadvantages, had brought him through "right side up with care," as he expressed it, and hence it could be accounted no shame to his young manhood that in the exuberance of his feelings he threw his arms about the head of his horse and fairly hugged him.

To his surprise, Buckskin broke loose, and, raising his head, uttered a shrill whinny.

It was answered by a cheery yell and a rapid rush of hoofs.

Cuthbert looked up, guessing what it meant.

A flying figure approached, showing all the signs of insanity, a figure that waved a pair of arms and a sombrero amid joyful shouts.

Of course, it was dear old Karl.

What a blessed meeting.

Cuthbert's heart was full to overflowing.

Really, it were almost worth those weeks of captivity and the perils he had encountered to realize how much he was beloved.

Down came Karl with a jump, and, regardless of everything, he clasped his friend in a pair of sturdy arms, holding him back anon to gaze into his face as though hardly able to believe such good luck.

Then the other cowboys rode up, having made a feint of chasing the Indians, which the worn-out condition of their mounts precluded them from doing with any show of success.

Cuthbert was proud of the warm greeting he received; what a sincere pleasure it was to feel that, during the year he had been among them, he had earned the good will of these rough, whole-hearted rustlers!

"Now, Cuthbert," began Karl, "I'm dying to hear

all about it. You've got a rare story, I bet. So jest sit right down and let's hear it."

"Oh, it's too long, by a good deal," said Cuthbert, laughing. "Suppose we put it off till we get home."

"No, sirree; I can't wait above another minute for you to begin."

"Well, Karl, I must have something to eat first, or I'll starve."

"That's up to me," broke in one of the cowboys; "I've got the meat. Let's go into camp."

"All right," assented Karl. "Cuthbert eats first; then the story."

Horses were picketed, a fire started, and the cowboy who had just spoken produced a package of fresh meat that his keen eye had seen fall from the back of the rearmost Indian pony at the time they made out to chase the Sioux hunters.

Although the braves had declined to cut loose from their plunder in order to lighten the loads of their ponies when chasing the fleeing white boy, it was a different thing when they themselves were being pursued by the reckless cow punchers.

So this rearmost fellow, in alarm lest he be cut out for the first victim of those hot fighters, had relieved his pony of its load, evidently acting on the belief that it was better to enter the village covered with shame than cling to his booty and never enter it at all.

For which philosophical solving of the conundrum Cuthbert was grateful when the meat began to send forth appetizing odors.

With true prairie etiquette they forbore to question him as to his strange adventures until he had helped himself three times to meat.

Then, since the demands of nature had been appeased, they began to bombard him right and left with questions.

Laughing at his inability to answer such a conglomeration, Cuthbert proposed that he tell the whole story, and to this they one and all eagerly agreed.

No Persian romancist ever had a more entranced audience than surrounded the boy who had twelve hours before been an almost hopeless prisoner in the Sioux camp.

He neglected no details, but described all he saw and had experienced from the hour when the midnight raid was made upon the wranglers and their saddle band charges, up to the time the hunting party gave chase.

Generally speaking, the cowboys listened in silence, only an occasional grunt or exclamation attesting their interest in the tale.

When, however, he spoke of Caleb Cross and the miserable alliance he had made with Standing Elk, in order to secure a fat ransom for the prisoner, their indignation manifested itself in a more violent form.

Evidently the treacherous schemer would have to steer clear of the range after this, and emigrate to Mexico, if he wished to avoid summary treatment at the hands of those whom he had once called comrades.

Cuthbert himself was so overflowing with a great joy at seeing Karl again that he could not for the life of him harbor ill feelings against even so disreputable a foe as this scheming cow puncher.

Perhaps he was not yet done with Caleb Cross, since such men fight hard to carry a point that promises rich rewards.

On his part, Cuthbert was to learn what brought his friends to this section of the country, so far away from Sunset Ranch.

A pleasant surprise awaited him.

The cowboys had really been on the way to the

Sioux village on the Sweetwater with the intention of effecting his escape through bold strategy.

It all came about through Little Buckshot.

Vain had been their search for the lost saddle horses, and the lad who was missing. Karl had scoured the country in every direction day after day without discovering the first trace of the aggressors, the rain having blotted out their trail.

Then came the young Indian brave, who, finding his white brothers in deep sorrow, volunteered to discover where Cuthbert had been hidden.

He knew the country to the north, and had his suspicions of the truth.

Overcoming the many obstacles by the way and traveling only at night to avoid the chances of discovery, he had, after weeks of absence, returned with great news that aroused the whole Sunset Ranch outfit, and quickly started a goodly bunch of cattle hustlers on the road north.

They had adopted his tactics, and, after a night ride, were about to camp in a coulee when the sound of whoops and yells directed their attention toward the west, where the chase was in full progress.

The young Indian had gone ahead and was to meet them on the following night at a rendezvous appointed.

So it seemed that, after all, Cuthbert's case had not been quite as hopeless as it appeared, for had he remained among the lodges of the Sioux village, these good friends would have shortly dropped in upon the scene, and brought their boldness and cunning into play with the avowed purpose of effecting a rescue.

Still, after all, he was well satisfied.

It was something to be proud of, a feather in his cap, to have outwitted his red jailers unaided, and not only to have effected his escape, but, at the same

time, bring away the spoils of war, in the shape of his good rifle and Karl's beloved cayuse.

From that hour no cowboy would dare again to look down upon Cuthbert, or believe that he deserved the name of tenderfoot; he had cut loose from his past and carved his name in imperishable letters upon the column of fame, according to a prairie boy's idea.

To pick up Little Buckshot and then turn their horses' heads toward home was the thing that now occupied their attention.

It was high noon when they leisurely galloped up to the bunch of timber in which a delightful spring gushed forth.

Here the dusky child of the prairie awaited them, and how his coal-black eyes glittered when he discovered Cuthbert, whom he had last watched a captive in the closely-guarded Sioux camp, among them.

Nor did the Virginian neglect to shower his thanks upon Little Buckshot for all he had done; he promised himself that the young brave should have a duplicate of his repeating rifle as soon as money could procure the same, and, by this substantial token, the Indian would understand that his zealous efforts in behalf of the white prisoner had been appreciated.

They concluded to rest the horses, and not make a start for home until the following morning.

Cowboys enjoy a chance to recuperate; theirs is such a busy, bustling existence, so full of unexpected calls upon their energy, that a lull in the storm is always appreciated.

So they lay around in soft places, and napped, while the horses cropped the still sweet herbage or recuperated after their long run.

Cuthbert, almost dead for sleep, soon found balm in Gilead, and knew nothing for hours.

When he awoke, the sun was not more than an hour above the horizon.

His comrades still lay around—some smoking, others playing cards, always a favorite method of killing time among cowboys.

Cuthbert felt refreshed, though still a little sore from his hard ride.

While he lay there, after the manner of one who quite enjoys a soft berth, he saw Karl drop into camp, glance around and then pick up the rifle.

“What now?” he asked, quickly.

“Antelope; come along and knock one down. We need meat for supper,” came Karl’s low answer.

A second invitation was not necessary.

Surely, all the sporting blood of the Lees ran in the veins of young Cuthbert, for the prospect of a hunt always electrified him—no hardships could daunt him when a chance to bag big game offered itself.

Together the two boys quitted the camp.

If their actions were noticed at all, the cowboys took it for granted they knew their business, and had some object in view looking to the general welfare.

So no one volunteered to accompany them.

The mote of timber was really larger than Cuthbert had imagined, for it took them all of five minutes to cut through its depth.

Once at the further side, the antelopes were discovered out on the open.

They were really beyond certain gunshot, and, in order to accomplish the result desired, it would be necessary to shorten the distance.

Two ways offered—to creep closer themselves, or draw the feeding animals in.

Karl decided to adopt both plans.

The long grass offered them hiding up to a certain clump of sage brush, beyond which no shelter

could be discovered, so that they must needs have recourse to a very ancient trick, and prey upon the little animals' bump of curiosity in order to secure fresh meat.

Luckily the wind bore almost due from the feeding antelope, and was considered favorable.

To creep through long prairie grass so as not to wave its plume and alarm so easily startled an animal as an antelope, requires considerable practice, but our boys were all right, and they made a success of their advance.

When finally both were snugly enconscd within the clump of sage, the antelope still continued to feed, and had not taken the alarm.

One of them—a buck, and, apparently the boss shepherd of the herd—whistled once or twice and stamped his hoofs as though distrustful that all was not as lovely as it seemed, though evidently he did not himself know from what quarter peril might be expected.

Karl was now ready to open the second act in the little border drama; he meant that the mountain should come to Mahomet—the game to the hunter.

Partly for this purpose he always made it a point to carry a blood-red bandana handkerchief of generous proportions.

This he now took out and knotted to the end of a stick which had been snatched from their path, especially for this purpose, as they came along.

"Watch me round 'em up," he whispered, as he began waving the red banner slowly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GRAY-COATED PIRATE.

A sudden shrill whistle of alarm from the watchful buck announced that the flag had been instantly discovered.

Although hidden themselves by the screen of sagebrush, the two boys could plainly see what occurred upon the open.

The antelope had started off in hot haste, and a greenhorn might have exposed himself, believing the game assuredly up.

Karl only fluttered the red signal more violently, knowing what the chances were.

Sure enough, the timid animals soon came to a stop, and, turning, surveyed the strange thing with undisguised wonder.

Then that fatal element of curiosity got the better of their alarm, for, by little fits and starts, they once more began to retrace the ground over which they had so recently fled.

Cuthbert was aware of a peculiar sensation that passed over his frame when he surveyed their trembling limbs and startled appearance.

He felt as guilty as though he had by some occult power hypnotized the beautiful creatures.

Surely the old Sioux medicine man was not in it with this species of witchcraft.

As usual, the practical overcame the sentimental; they needed fresh meat, and a cowboy has no business giving way to such feelings, at any rate.

So he crushed them down, and prepared to do slaughter; the old spirit of a hunter, handed down from remote ancestors who had to live by the chase, was rampant.

Nearer still. Each little run brought them so many yards closer to the fatal flag that Karl now moved sedately to and fro.

They were almost within pistol shot, and gave signs of such alarm that it was evident the fascination could not last much longer.

"Ready?" whispered Karl, changing the flag to his left hand, while, with his right, he drew his heavy revolver.

"Yes," came the steady response.

"Take the young buck on the left."

"Good!"

"Then let go!"

Cuthbert fired almost instantly, and at that distance his aim was fatal.

The young buck fell to the grass, while the balance of the herd sprang away as if made up of springs, the old veteran covering the rear, like the gallant defender he was.

Karl had opened with his battery, and the repeating gun was worked for a couple more shots ere the antelope had passed out of range.

The boys had reason to be satisfied, since three head of the game fell to their share.

"I'm glad that fine old chap got away," remarked Cuthbert, as they tied the legs of their quarry together preparatory to "toting" them to camp, as the Virginian expressed it.

"And I'm not sorry. He deserved to get off scot free, and, besides, I hadn't much of a liking to try my teeth on his tough flesh," laughed Karl.

"Perhaps the next time he sees a red handkerchief fluttering in the breeze he may remember this sad day."

"Perhaps; but I doubt it. Antelopes are funny birds; they're skeery all right, but mighty curious. If there's anything new around they jest got to see

what it is. Can't stop themselves. That's about it."

"It is singular. No other animal on the prairie has that same curiosity, I suppose."

"I reckon not so bad as antelope, anyway."

"And yet," said Cuthbert, reflectively, "I have seen pretty much the same thing carried out on Chesapeake Bay, with duck as the victims."

Karl looked at him curiously to see if he were really in earnest.

"Ducks? Come, that's a new one on me."

"I'll tell you how it's done. We have a certain kind of dog educated up to the business. When a great raft of ducks persists in settling out of gunshot from the shore, the hunters hide in the bushes, and then start the dog to work. He seems to enter into the spirit of the thing, races down the little beach, rolls and tumbles and squirms as though in a fit.

"Apparently, the wild duck has about as much curiosity in its anatomy as an antelope, for, by degrees, the whole flock keeps swimming in closer to the shore, with necks outstretched and showing every indication of being fascinated by the spectacle.

"Of course, when within easy gun shot, a murderous fire is poured into the thick of them by the concealed hunters, and the water is often covered with the dead and dying. We call this method of duck-shooting 'tolling,' as the little dog tolls or draws the birds in."

"All that is new to me, and I'd like to have a shy at it myself," declared Karl.

"You will, when we go East," said his chum, as if that part of it were all arranged.

Between them they carried the antelope to the trees and hung a couple of carcasses high above the best jump a hungry wolf could make.

Then the other was taken to camp to serve as the evening meal.

It was a very jolly party that feasted around the camp-fire that night.

Cuthbert many times looked upon the merry company and tears would come unbidden into his eyes when he remembered the lonesome evenings spent in the Sioux village, with just such a picture dancing before his mental vision.

Sometimes it seemed so much like a dream that he could hardly believe in his good fortune, and felt compelled to pinch himself in order to make certain that he had not imagined it all, and would awaken to keen disappointment, to find himself once more among the lodges of Standing Elk's village.

The boys were quite jolly.

They sang comic songs and rattled off jokes between Munchausen yarns.

It does not take a great deal to make your prairie cowboy supremely happy; care sits lightly on his brow, for he leaves all of that to his employer—the ranch owner.

With him, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and, having enough food for the present, he takes little heed of the morrow, since that will be to-day when it comes.

Nevertheless, they were not wholly reckless; nor did they forget that, strictly speaking, they were in an enemy's country.

There were certain precautions to be taken in order to guard against a sudden surprise and a stampede of their stock.

The horses were put in a rope corral, besides being watched.

A guard would be on duty from sunset to sunrise, and if the pursuing Sioux managed to come upon the scene and get the better of them they would deserve success.

Cuthbert and Karl picked out a soft spot on which to throw their blankets.

Long they lay there, chatting in low tones.

It was a great treat to the boy who had been so long isolated from his friends, to be there at ease and exchange confidences with the lad who was dearer to him than a brother.

The night wind stirred the leaves overhead, the camp fire burned low, here and there a cowboy lay in his blanket, breathing hard in slumber, and ever and anon came the regular noises of the night, the strident burr of the cricket, sharper notes of katydids, the croaking of frogs, with the more distant barking of prairie dogs, of coyotes and howling of wolves.

Once Karl caught a sound that started him up to a sitting posture.

"That was a panther?" said Cuthbert, in the form of an inquiry.

"Yes, and a jim-dandy, too, I reckon."

The two boys looked at each other.

Long before, Cuthbert had expressed a hope that fortune might be kind enough to permit him to secure a good panther skin to take East when he migrated.

The same thought came to each mind—was this the golden opportunity? would they dare venture to stalk the terror of the American forest in his hunting grounds?

Youth is ever impetuous—reckless, if you will.

These lads would have been much wiser, no doubt, had they let the gray beast alone, and, turning over upon their blankets, wooed the gentle goddess of slumber.

But it seemed to their minds as though the repeated scream of this old jay-hawker might be a challenge to come out and meet him.

Both boys were uneasy.

"He's in the timber," ventured Cuthbert.

"Sure."

"And not far away."

Karl jumped up.

"We forgot the antelopes. The critter smells the fresh blood and he's making that way."

Cuthbert laughed.

"That settles it. No true-born American could lie quiet and allow a miserable thief to rob him of the fruits of his labor. We must sally forth and interview Mr. Panther."

Although he spoke so lightly, he realized that such an undertaking was not child's play—that it was full of danger.

As the thing was now settled, Karl proceeded to make ready for business.

He went about it very quietly, as though it were a journey ahead, for which certain preparations must be made.

The Winchester was handed to Cuthbert with instructions to make sure it was in perfect order, with plenty of cartridges in the reservoir, since there could be no telling how many shots would be needed to complete the tragedy.

Meanwhile Karl found several light wood torches that would serve as a means of illumination, at the same time protecting the boys from an attack, since, in common with other wild animals of the feline species, a panther has a peculiar dread of fire.

This was the sum total of their preparations for the expected battle.

Several of the cowboys who were awake watched Karl, knowing what was in the wind. They made a few suggestions, based upon past experience but did not offer to accompany the young hunters, knowing Karl so well, and that he was well able to look out for both himself and the friend in his charge.

Together the boys left camp.

Karl carried the torch, having an extra supply of touchwood fastened to his back; at the same time he held his gun in the other hand, ready, like a true cowboy, to meet a sudden emergency.

Cuthbert handled the Winchester.

If the Virginia lad was nervous or excited in the least—which would have been natural enough, considering the circumstances—he gave no outward manifestation of the fact.

Of course, he knew this was game of quite a different calibre from antelope—that there was dire peril in hunting a big “gray jacket,” as Karl called the panther, in his native woods and while the shadows of night held sway.

But Cuthbert had a stanch heart, and he knew this adventure was of his own seeking, so that he had no cause for complaint.

How ghastly the woods looked, once the adventurous youths had left the vicinity of the fire and plunged into their depths.

Why, the sudden hoot of an owl startled Cuthbert and made him turn half way around, with an involuntary upward fling of the gun toward his shoulder.

Karl chuckled when he saw this, evidently appreciating how his comrade’s nerves were wrought up to a high tension, and that, at any rate, he did not mean to be taken unawares.

When next that peculiarly blood-curdling scream reached their ears it came from a quarter close by.

The panther was ahead of them, and even at that moment must have reached the edge of the timber where the two antelope carcasses hung.

Karl stepped up more briskly, the torch flaming above his head, while, close beside him, walked Cuthbert, his gun at a ready, his eager eyes endeavoring to pierce the darkness beyond as though he would

catch a first glimpse of the terrible beast crouching somewhere in their path.

No more did that cry guide them.

The panther had found his prey, and was busily engaged in endeavoring to gain possession.

"Steady now!"

It was Karl who spoke, and his voice did not show the least sign of nervous strain; he had been reared among such scenes, and familiarity is apt to breed more or less contempt.

Evidently they were close upon the spot where the game had been hung up.

Cuthbert's strained hearing now caught a sound that was quite different from anything he had heretofore heard—a peculiar whining, purring noise, not unlike that which a house cat gives forth when satisfied with the world.

"He's got one carcass on the ground," said Karl, judging from the sounds.

So his comrade knew where to look in order to catch the first glimpse of the beast.

That the panther was chewing at the game, even Cuthbert was able to understand, and there was little danger of his leaving his feast because of their approach; rather might he be expected to vent his ill humor at being thus disturbed by an attack.

Closer still.

The sounds were just beyond.

"Steady, boy!" muttered Karl.

A few more steps.

"I see him," whispered Cuthbert.

"That ain't enough—too risky a shot. We must go closer," said the undaunted Karl, and the Virginian knew he was right.

Much depended on the first shot; even the bravest of prairie men would rather be excused from encountering a wounded mountain lion.

It must be said, to Cuthbert's credit, that he man-

aged to control his nerves fairly well while thus deliberately walking up to the beast, which had now ceased its catlike purr, and was growling savagely in a way quite venomous enough to curdle one's blood.

Surely, such an experience was sufficient to acquit any one of cowardice. Men who, in the heat and excitement of battle, would rush into the jaws of death and lead a forlorn charge against a smoking, blazing battery, might hesitate to deliberately advance foot by foot close up to this bristling monster.

Thanks to the illumination afforded by the torch Karl carried, they could now see the beast quite plainly.

He squatted there upon the ground, evidently with the slender body of the antelope under his paws; his yellow eyes glared like two electric balls of fire, and he continued to emit the most terrifying sounds to indicate his anger at being disturbed.

Karl stopped.

The time for action had arrived.

Steadily Cuthbert brought his gun to bear, having in mind a shot that would count.

He must have conquered that fluttering at his heart, for his hands were quite firm.

Without ceasing to regard his intended quarry, he knew Karl had also raised his gun and was covering the panther, determined to have a hand in the final scene.

"When you are ready, give it to him," came the low admonition.

It was, indeed, time, for the beast had gathered for a spring, despite the fear he might supposedly entertain for the blazing torch.

When Cuthbert pulled trigger he heard the report of the revolver so closely blended with that of the gun that they seemed as one.

Karl had coached him as to what next to do.

Even though the great beast were fatally struck

the chances were he would make a flying leap, since his muscles were set for such a purpose.

He must not find them in the same position when he landed.

Accordingly, Cuthbert had no sooner discharged his gun than he threw himself to one side. Even then the body of the panther struck him a glancing blow as he shot past, that well-nigh knocked the rifle out of his hands, and certainly caused his heart to stand still with a certain dread.

Though knocked to his knees, Cuthbert did not lose his head. Another cartridge was snapped into the chamber, and then he turned to face the gray-coated monster once more.

The panther was floundering where he struck, snapping his terrible jaws and uttering growls as before, yet evidently partly paralyzed from the effect of the first discharge, and unable to make the leap he designed.

"Whoop! you've got the critter," shouted Karl, approaching with his torch; "finish him neatly now, and spare his head."

The worst was past.

Cuthbert trembled with excitement, now that victory seemed within his grasp.

Nevertheless, he managed to draw a bead on the spot where he knew he could reach the animal's heart, and let fly.

That finished Mr. Panther in a jiffy, and Cuthbert drew a sigh of relief when the big tiger cat rolled over, clawing at space.

Reaction set in, compelling him to drop his gun and sink to the ground.

Karl sprang to his side.

"Not hurt, I hope, old fellow?" he asked, solicitously.

"It's the shock and the strain; I'll be all right pres-

ently. Take the gun and look out. This fellow may have a mate near by," Cuthbert said.

But Karl was not worried over that chance; with such a formidable weapon of defense it mattered little as to whether there was one or half-a-dozen panthers in the timber.

Finally Cuthbert felt himself again, and, as the beast had given his last kick, he went eagerly forward to survey his quarry.

Any boy might well have been pardoned for feeling proud over such a trophy.

Karl declared the panther to be the very largest he had ever seen, and even the oldest cowboy in the bunch confessed he had never, in a long experience, run across a mountain lion of such huge proportions.

So that it was quite a feather in Cuthbert's cap, of which he might well be proud.

Then shouts were heard, to which they sent back answering whoops, and presently some of the cowboys appeared on the scene, curious to know what measure of success fortune had meted out to the young hunters of big game.

It was a proud moment for Cuthbert.

But he would not soon forget the harrowing growls of the big cat, and the shock he received when the flying beast struck him a glancing clip. There was a black and blue spot on his left shoulder for some weeks afterward, as a reminder of the little adventure.

That skin, together with the head, he hoped to take East with him later on as a memento of his life on the plains.

Karl was up at daylight to skin the animal—Karl, who knew not what it was to spare himself when he could do something for others.

If Standing Elk and his braves had come this far south in their search for the runaway, they did not discover themselves to the cowboy band from

Sunset Ranch, much to the grief of several desperate souls among the rough riders who would really rather fight than eat, and who, having cast their fortunes in with this expedition under the positive belief that the Indian village must be attacked and much savage warfare ensue, were really disheartened at the way things turned out.

Indeed, one or more of them even went so far as to reproach Cuthbert for cutting loose so soon and spoiling their romantic plans of rescue, which might have taken Little Buckshot into the village disguised as the medicine man, and ended with the stampede of all the horses in the corral—perhaps the acquisition of their own stolen property.

Of course, Cuthbert could not feel that he was responsible in any sense, since he had acted in an independent spirit; more than one moon had he waited for the rescue that never came, so he was justified in finally taking matters in his own hands.

Of course, it was all in fun. Why, the chap who complained the most had been the loudest in his praise of Cuthbert's gallant escape.

He knew how to take these rough spirits, and joked with them after a man of their heart.

After breakfast the camp was broken up.

No sign of a disturbing element could be seen upon the prairie, but these men were always ready to meet a surprise, and while galloping on toward the far distant range, kept on the lookout for hidden danger.

The tricky Indians would like nothing better than to hide in some depression, and ambush them as they rode along; such traps had been successfully worked in the past, and never became too ancient to suit the dusky braves.

It was a long ride, and another camp became necessary, in order to spare their ponies.

The range was not far away; cattle had even been

seen, and Cuthbert's heart beat high with pleasure at the familiar sight.

Presently he would be mounted on his own horse, with a lariat in hand, dashing hither and yon in pursuit of obstinate cattle that refused to keep with the herd.

It surprised him to realize what a strange fascination this wild life held for him. When a prisoner among the Sioux he had thought that, once more free, he would start East and resume his former career; but the first sight of cattle awoke within him the desire to see more of this wonderful country and its strange sights. There were avenues he had not yet explored, of which Karl had never ceased to talk—of hunting and trapping in the winter, and expeditions to Texas and old Mexico after cattle—of the gold miner's wild life, seeking fortune's smiles amid the rugged fastnesses of the Black Hills.

Well, all things considered, he was not yet ready to give up this adventurous life and resume his hopeless search in city and town for the girl cousin who persisted in being a will-o'-the-wisp, continually eluding his grasp.

And this determination became stronger the next day when he sighted the beloved Sunset Ranch, and a charming little maid named Polly galloped out on her pony to meet and welcome home the long lost lad who had won a place in her warm girlish heart.

CHAPTER XV.

ALL FOR POLLY.

The old life was resumed.

For a time Cuthbert enjoyed it to the full, and was never so happy as when cruising about over the prairie mounted on his good steed, free to go and come at will.

The germ was working, however, in the seed planted by Karl's stories of other scenes, and by degrees a resolution was being formed not to pass another winter on a northern cattle range, where the exposure was terrific at times.

He talked it over with Karl on many occasions when they chummed together, roping cattle, or watching horses at night.

By degrees a plan was formed which they intended carrying out.

This consisted of a grand hunt for the winter away up in the woods and hills of which Old Sile had told them such amazing stories.

The best of it was the old veteran had been persuaded to be one of the party.

Cuthbert left matters entirely in his hands, with the understanding that nothing that money could purchase was to be left out if it could be conveniently carried and would add to their comfort.

Meanwhile, the fall days had come—those halcyon days, full of splendid vigor and never to be forgotten, when one seemed to renew his youth like the eagle, and simply rejoiced to know that he was alive and could appreciate the glorious things around him.

The boys had almost forgotten all about old Standing Elk, and, as for Caleb Cross, he had never

been seen again on his old stamping ground—which was a good thing, so far as his bodily health was concerned, for the boys of X bar X outfit stood ready to make it exceedingly warm for a fellow answering his description, should he show up.

It was about this time trouble came.

A bolt of lightning from a clear sky could not have created more consternation.

Karl and Cuthbert were galloping leisurely home after a long chase after a bunch of straying cattle supposed to belong to their herds, but which, upon being rounded up, proved to have the circular brand of the Cody ranch, far off to the south, when they saw Polly coming to meet them, mounted on her pony, which she rode like an Indian princess.

Now, this in itself was nothing unusual, since she often came out to ride a mile or two in company with her adopted brothers; but somehow, even at a distance, they discovered that the girl was not her bonnie, laughing self.

“Something wrong at the ranch,” said Karl, quickening his horse’s gait.

Cuthbert, too, was more disturbed than his face betrayed; he seemed to feel as though a great disaster were impending.

Polly had been crying; her eyes were red and did not look as beautiful as usual.

“Hello!” exclaimed brusque Karl, “what’s the matter with you, Polly? Who’s been abusing you?”

She drew herself up with dignity.

“No one; you know very well I wouldn’t stand abuse from anybody. It’s worse than that,” her voice suddenly failing her, and a whimper indicating great distress of mind.

Karl whistled, while Cuthbert frowned.

“Worse than that?” they cried, in chorus.

“Yes, far worse. I’m going away,” she piped, between her sobs.

Then the two lads looked at each other in dire consternation, as they realized that in truth some sort of calamity had happened.

"Going away—is Mr. Kelly thinking, after all, of sending you East to school?" for some such project as this had been mentioned.

"Mr. Kelly hasn't anything to do with it," answered Polly, girl-like, trying to bewilder them a little.

"Then, who has, I'd like to know?"

"He's come back."

The boys looked at each other again and shook their heads in despair.

"Oh, he has!" said Karl, with some sarcasm.

"He wasn't killed by the Indians at all."

"What! Do you mean that old reprobate who allowed you to be captured by the Indians?" cried Cuthbert, in dismay.

"My uncle," she said, reprovingly.

"I don't care if he is your uncle ten times over. You've told us enough about his mean ways to make any one hate and despise him. And so the Indians let him live! I don't believe I can ever forgive them for that."

"Why, Cuthbert?" reproachfully.

"What business has he popping up again like an old Jack-in-the-box—what right has he to demand that you leave the comfortable home you are in and go wandering over the face of the earth again with him?"

"He says he has—claims that I was left in his charge, and besides that I will be worth a fortune to him some day."

"Well, we'll see," said Karl, grimly.

"Polly, you don't want to go?" appealed Cuthbert.

"No, oh, no! It will break my heart," wailed the girl, with no thought now of dignity, only the great sorrow that overwhelmed her, rushing to the front.

"Then, Polly; don't fret—you're going to stay," said Cuthbert, solemnly, while Karl nodded assent.

It might have been very amusing to any outsider to have witnessed this little scene, but the boys were certainly dead in earnest.

The bridle was on her pony's neck. She caught a hand of each and gave them such a thankful look from her tear-dimmed eyes.

You would have thought the boys were a couple of mail-clad knights come to rescue a forlorn princess from the giant's castle; and indeed so they were, in truth, according to her way of thinking.

"What does Mr. Kelly say?" asked Cuthbert, a little uneasily.

"He seems uncertain how to act. You know he has a great respect for the law, and yet he really cares for poor me. I think when you side with me Mr. Kelly will get new backbone and refuse to give me up."

"You bet he will!" said Karl, briskly.

"Come, cheer up, Polly. We'll see you through all right. Now for a race to the ranch."

Cuthbert wished to get the thing over with as soon as possible. When there was any disagreeable duty to be performed he was always in a great hurry.

So the three started off, and Polly won, as she always did, for the boys knew it gave her infinite pleasure; and, besides, they secretly liked to gallop behind, admiring the little witch with the long, flowing hair, who turned to laugh and mock their apparently useless efforts to catch up with the procession.

Accordingly, when they presently drew up at the door of the long, low ranch building, Polly, with flushed cheeks and sparkling, saucy eyes, looked quite different from the woe-begone girl who had come to meet them.

They found Mr. Kelly and his wife, together with several of the boys, at the door.

There was also a stranger.

Cuthbert had heartily disliked Polly's uncle from the idea of the man he had formed in his mind, based upon many incidents mentioned from time to time by Polly.

Hence he was not at all surprised to see a sinister, sleek-looking individual of middle age, who could assume the holy countenance of a missionary or look like a pirate, at pleasure.

The whole controversy was renewed.

Mr. Kelly told how dear Polly had become to them, and offered the man quite a sum if he would go away and renounce all claim to the girl he called his niece.

Although the fellow's crafty eyes glittered at mention of the sum, still he flatly refused to accept it, giving as his reason that she had been left in his charge as a sacred trust, and also that he expected some day she would be worth ten times the paltry sum Mr. Kelly offered him.

Then the blood of old Irish kings arose in the ranch owner's veins.

He gave the fellow just ten minutes to mount his horse and get away.

"Sue if you want—carry it to court if it pleases you. Perhaps I may have some pretty things to tell, if what Mrs. Kelly has learned from the child is true. Out in this country they hang a man for kidnapping a child. Now, go your way—the girl remains with us."

When the ranchman pronounced what was his ultimatum, the cowboys, who had been anxiously awaiting the turn of affairs, burst into a mighty shout, in which Karl and Cuthbert joined. Polly ran to Mother Kelly and threw her arms around the neck of that good dame.

As for her uncle, he threw aside the mask, since a sanctified face would avail no longer, and the look he gave Mr. Kelly and his cowboys was that of an infuriated tiger.

"Very good. You win now, but my day will come, as sure as my name is Jasper Hosmer."

He was wise enough to limit his harangue to these few words, for the Sunset Ranch boys were in a humor to have ducked him in the mill pond; perhaps even tarred and feathered him, did he go too far.

He rode away, boiling with wrath, but wise enough to repress it.

A mile away he turned and shook his fist at the ranch, even as Marmion of old did his mail-clad hand when he had cleared the drawbridge trembling on the rise at Douglas Castle, after defying the proud Scottish laird.

There was a yelp, as of dogs let loose from the leash, and every eager cowboy sprang for his horse, longing to pursue the fellow and drag him at the end of a rope; but Mr. Kelly sternly forbade the least effort being made to impede Jasper Hosmer's withdrawal from the scene.

"Only remember, that I draw the line there. If the skunk shows up again, he means evil, and I don't want to know anything about it," by which he meant they were to have a free hand in dealing with the fellow should he come prowling about with the idea of stealing Polly or doing her protectors any damage.

This had to satisfy them.

Polly was the happiest girl in all the prairie country that night.

For some time she had secretly dreaded lest this so-styled uncle might turn up again, since he was a cat with nine lives; and, knowing his unkind treatment of old, she shuddered at the prospect of being

compelled to accompany him once more in his wanderings.

Mrs. Kelly had a long talk with the girl, and the ranch owner was also called into consultation, as though matters of moment were being discussed, while Polly related facts having a bearing on her past history, which she had thus far kept to herself.

Apparently they had nothing to fear. This disturber of the peace of Sunset Ranch appeared to be single-handed, and would probably keep clear of the range lest he run across a squad of the indignant cowboys, who would not hesitate to jerk rope with him.

At the same time, he might be in touch with some of the tough characters, or "bad men," who for various causes had been run out of the settlements, so that a raid was possible.

For a time Polly haunted the vicinity of the house, and all went well.

By degrees, however, the scare passed away, and the beautiful weather of Indian summer enticed her to resume her former free life, gathering the fall flowers, chasing jack rabbits, watching the cunning antics of the prairie dogs and all the various pleasures to be found at this season of the year, when the October days bring bright sunshine and crisp ozone.

Even the boys, who had constituted themselves into a guard of honor, gradually lost their fear of trouble.

That was where they failed to give the man full credit for dogged perseverance—had they known the full nature of the game he was playing they might have expected his return.

For the inveterate uncle came back.

This time he did not ride boldly up to the door of

the ranch and insolently demand that the girl, his niece, be turned over to him.

That sort of bravado would have availed him nothing, save possibly an elegant coat of tar and feathers and a Mazeppa ride on the back of a wild broncho.

He knew this, and laid his plans accordingly. He could play a game of trickery equal to the most wily Indian.

There were others whose acquaintance he formed—men ready to undertake desperate work at the toss of a hat, or perhaps who entertained a hatred for the owner of Sunset Ranch on account of fancied or real grievances.

Perhaps Caleb Cross was in the swim. It would not be at all surprising.

At any rate the game was laid, and all that remained was to find an opportunity.

It was one afternoon that Cuthbert came galloping like mad toward the ranch house, a look of deep concern on his face.

“Where’s Polly?” he shouted before drawing rein.

Mr. Kelly, smoking at his ease on the porch, had jumped up on seeing that the boy appeared excited.

“I don’t know—wife, wife, where’s Polly—have you seen her lately?” he called.

Down went the pipe, and he began buckling on his well-worn belt, holding knife and gun.

Mrs. Kelly came out, white and trembling.

“An hour ago she went flying past the window yonder on her pony, and sent me a merry laugh and a kiss. Oh! what has happened to the child?”

“Yes, what do you know, Cuthbert?” demanded the steady ranch owner, buckling his belt.

Cuthbert gave a groan.

“Simply that she’s been carried off.”

"That uncle of hers——"

"I reckon he was with them."

"Wait; tell me when I come back. Now for the boys to have a chance to stretch rope," grimly.

With that Kelly sprang to the alarm bell, upon which he beat such a fierce tattoo that it could have been heard for miles around.

Instantly from various directions horsemen were seen in full speed; they headed one and all toward the ranch as spokes turn toward the hub of a wheel.

Perhaps in five minutes a dozen cow punchers might be on the spot, eager to participate in the chase that would begin.

Back again to where Cuthbert was talking with the good wife, Kelly skipped.

He was as cool and clear-headed as though giving orders for a grand round-up, and in an emergency such as this it were worth something to have so collected a man in charge.

"Now, tell me all," he said:

Cuthbert had mastered his excitement; he seemed to find Kelly's nerve contagious.

Besides, he knew that time counted for something, and the occasion called for a brief and comprehensive statement upon which Mr. Kelly could found his plan of action.

"It was this way: We were coming home from Cutler's Creek with a few head of stock for shipment when we caught a glimpse of a squad of horsemen just passing out of sight beyond the queer ridge known as the Pack Saddle. Something white fluttering among them caught my eye, and I was sure I saw a woman or girl waving a pocket handkerchief before they dropped out of sight.

"Karl stood ready to declare it was Polly. You know his wonderful eyes, and that this uncle of hers was one of the raiders.

"We consulted hastily, and while he started to follow after the party I put for home. I reckon I made the fifteen miles in less than forty minutes, with the horse tired at that."

"How many did you say there were?" asked Mr. Kelly, quietly.

"I didn't count, but I should say not less than five in the bunch."

"H'm. We'll have some warm times yet I expect. And over the Pack Saddle, too! They mean to run for the hills, where some of these desperadoes have dens of hiding. Wife, get me another handful of cartridges. My boy, pick out a fresh mount. There'll be some hot riding before morning, I reckon."

There was a stern look on Kelly's flushed face, an expression that boded ill for the rascals who had kidnapped poor Polly, when the hour of reckoning came.

"No mercy, remember. The border law is death to a horse thief, and this critter has robbed me of something more valuable than all my saddle band. For, hark ye, boys! Mrs. Kelly and myself have learned since he was here that after all he never bore the relation of uncle to our Polly—she was stolen by him from her dying father, a man called Gordon. That was the girl's secret; she was told to guard it always, because her father had broken the law, and the disgrace would attach to her. So he's only a rascal and a thief after all, and deserves no mercy at your hands."

"Did you say Gordon?" demanded Cuthbert, pale with a sudden tremendous suspicion, as he caught Mr. Kelly's arm ere he could turn away, "and was her father's name Bernard?"

"Why, yes, so Polly said," declared Mrs. Kelly, in womanly wonder.

Cuthbert's face was a study; it seemed filled with amazement, joy and dismay, if such a rare combination could exist.

"Oh! what a strange thing it all is. Why did Polly guard her secret so long from me? One little hint must have awakened suspicions, and I told her of my search without ever mentioning names. What a fool I have been. All the while she has been so near me, the little cousin for whom I have searched half over the world, to find whom was the last promise I made my dying mother."

"Cousin—Polly!" ejaculated the ranchman's wife, now beaming with sudden joy, for she, too, knew Cuthbert's story in outline, without any of the details or names.

"Yes, I believe she is really Hildegard Gordon, the girl I have wanted so long to find," declared Cuthbert, resolutely.

"That is her real name, sure enough, though she says she has always been called Polly, and likes it best. This is a wonderful thing. God grant you bring her back safe and sound, so that we may have double cause for rejoicing."

Cuthbert could not linger, even to discuss so remarkable a thing.

If all went well there would be time enough for this later on, when Polly had been snatched from the hands of scheming Jasper Hosmer, who evidently had a pretty good inkling of the truth, and meant to realize upon the girl's prospects.

He sprang away to rope a new mount, not desirous of being left in the lurch when the rescuing band galloped away from Sunset Ranch, bound almost due northeast.

There was considerable bustle and confusion around that region for a brief time, as cowboys changed their saddles and made other hasty preparations for a hot chase.

No class of men can get ready for action in quicker time than these rough riders, and ere twenty minutes had followed the clang of the alarm bell they were off.

No shouts and cheers marked their departure, but grim faces and set jaws told of the determination to make it exceedingly warm for the desperadoes when the final round-up occurred.

Cuthbert was in a fever heat.

He could hardly yet believe the wonderful good fortune that had fallen to his lot. It seemed too good to be true, for of all the girls he had ever met Polly was the one he would have chosen for a cousin had he been given the opportunity.

And Karl, who also loved the girl like a sister, how delighted he would be when he learned the amazing truth!

Then the dangerous nature of their mission came up before him to trouble his mind and chase away the pleasant dreams in which he had just been indulging.

Would Karl be able to keep them in sight? He was but one against many, and they might turn upon him to inflict injury.

Meanwhile the pace grew hotter, as the horses warmed to their work, and Pack Saddle speedily loomed up ahead.

Several other cowboys had been met and given the news to circulate around, so that a second party might be organized to follow their trail, since there could be no telling what dangers lay ahead of them, once they penetrated the Bad Lands.

Cuthbert found himself entering into the spirit of the thing with quite as much vim as any of the old cow punchers.

His year and more on the prairie had filled him

with that love for adventure always lying dormant in a natural boy's system until some accident calls it into action.

Besides, he had a sufficient motive to excuse any ferocity he might feel toward the miserable kidnappers. Polly had turned out to be the will-o'-the-wisp he had chased so long, his own cousin, a Gordon, of Virginia, bless her sweet face! And family pride, as well as the affection he bore her, demanded that he take a leading part in her speedy rescue.

So that he was firmly resolved to let no scruple hinder him from accomplishing this thing, if so be a kindly fortune gave him the opportunity.

One thing pleased him mightily.

They had by the greatest accident in the world run across Old Sile, plodding along upon an ancient and weary broncho, bound for the ranch with a message from his employer down at the Lone Star outfit.

Now, Old Sile was invaluable in an affair of this kind, and Mr. Kelly, thankful for the good fortune that sent him their way, immediately saw a chance to give him a good mount, as there was one cowboy in the band just recovering from a severe fall and really not fit for such a campaign.

So, to his disgust, he was sent back on the scarecrow beast Old Sile had ridden, while the old ranger threw a leg over the fresh mount. Nothing pleased Sile half so much as a chance for action. He seemed to grow twenty years younger at a jump; his gray eyes twinkled, and that chuckle of his broke forth at intervals as though he considered it a rare piece of good luck to be thus waylaid and forced to join a party of self-appointed Regulators. To destroy vermin he considered constituted one of the most religious duties of an honest man, and it mattered little to him whether the destruction fell upon beast,

bird, reptile or human being, so long as they were a bad lot.

And, far beyond Pack Saddle, they scoured the plain, following the broad trail; thus the coming of night found them still pushing grimly on, a determined, eager band.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE KARL WENT.

When Karl parted from his bosom friend and started to chase across the prairie after the band of mounted men in whose midst there seemed good reason to believe his keen eyes had discovered Polly, he was not thinking to any extent of the danger he ran.

Rather, it was the miserable fate of the girl that gave him cause for anxiety.

He had good reason to know how thoroughly she detested this man claiming to be her uncle and guardian, and that it was only force which could influence her to accompany him.

Polly was completely satisfied with her life at the Kelly ranch, where each day was so many hours of joy, and where her sweet voice was so often uplifted in notes of glad thanksgiving.

To go out again into the world, to resume a miserable nomadic life in company with this man from whom she insensibly shrank, though he had never been positively cruel to her—this prospect had been one to fill her with horror, as Karl well knew.

Hence, he could be quite positive that she had not accompanied Jasper of her own free will.

Karl had in his younger life been concerned in many dangerous enterprises.

These usually had connection with hunting adventures and the troubles that were apt to arise upon the range.

Besides, there were occasions when his skill was pitted against human sagacity, and the game was a serious battle of wits and endurance.

The raid of the cattle thieves and the seizure of

the saddle band at the time Cuthbert was taken prisoner were but two instances among quite a number when he found himself forced to face danger at the hands of unscrupulous human beings.

He believed it to be his duty to keep these riders in sight as long as possible, and make as broad a trail as he could for the cowboys to follow.

True, the lawless spirits ahead might turn upon him, ready to visit summary punishment upon the daring lad who persisted in thus dogging their flight.

All that he took into consideration, but it did not change his mind an iota.

Of course, he did not expect to fight except if driven into the last ditch, but there were possibilities of effecting Polly's escape that aroused great hope in his breast.

The thing that worried him most of all was the late hour.

Night would soon fall upon the scene.

True, there was a moon that might be of some assistance, but Karl, if given his choice, would have much preferred a day chase, after which those ahead might lie down, wearied with their long ride, and give him an opportunity to do a little strategy.

They might escape him in the night.

With dogged perseverance he meant to hang on as long as he could, risking even a bullet from some one among them who might be detailed to fall behind and make way with a pursuer who threatened to become troublesome.

So the night fell.

He had occasional glimpses of the band, and every time he counted them their number was intact.

Whether they had discovered his pursuit or not he could not decide. There had been as yet no evidence of such a thing, and he used all possible precautions to avoid it, sometimes hovering back of a rise until they had passed from sight in another de-

pression, the country being wonderfully well adapted for just such a system of tactics.

There was the moon, beaming above, and the evening star shone softly in the west.

Another phase of the chase was opened up.

"Guess I've got to depend on my ears now," he muttered; "moonshine is always a bit muddling, and even that won't hold out long."

He felt reasonably sure the desperadoes would not make a halt for supper. They had but one desire at present, and this was to place just as much ground as possible between themselves and Sunset Ranch, knowing what a flurry the disappearance of little Polly would create, and how hot a pursuit must be instituted.

All seemed to go well.

The chase led almost in the teeth of a cool zephyr blowing out of the north, so that he was enabled to catch an occasional thump of horses' hoofs when the cavalcade happened upon a patch of dry prairie harder than usual, while those he hunted being to windward had no such chance of detecting his near presence by sound.

Buckskin was a gallant horse, as had been proven on numberless occasions, yet the pace began to tell upon even him as the night drew on, with no let-up in the onward flight.

He had already covered many miles the preceding day, and was hardly in a fit condition to hold his own with the fresh steeds ridden by Jasper and his allies.

"Unless them fellers in front call a halt mighty soon," said Karl, "I'll have to drop out of the race. Buckskin's 'bout done up."

He had high hopes that they did not suspect his pursuit, strange as this might seem, for he felt sure they would have laid some sort of trap, by means of

which he would be tripped up, had they guessed his presence.

As good fortune would have it, he heard the hard gallop suddenly break into a walk, and knew that what he had long yearned to have happen had come to pass.

"Whoa, Buckskin, boy!" he called out, softly.

Then, pulling the only too willing nag in, he allowed him to move forward slowly.

Meanwhile he strained his vision for some sign of the kidnappers.

The men were cold and hungry, and took the chances of discovery—food and hot coffee they must have after lying out all day and making this long, hard run.

When Karl saw the little glow of a fire he rejoiced.

"Buckskin, my boy, we're in luck," he whispered in the ear of his sympathetic steed. "This delay's going to give you a chance to rest and pluck up—see?"

Buckskin flicked his tail and rubbed his soft muzzle against the cowboy's hand.

"Then, too," said Karl, "it's going to give me a chance to spy around this camp and see what these fellers are, anyway."

Buckskin was too well bred to whinny when there was any danger around, but he shook his head sagaciously, and Karl was satisfied.

"Then, best of all," concluded the youngster, "it'll give the lot at the camp time to catch up, and every minute is precious. And now, my boy, I'll fix you up, and go on a little tour."

With which he proceeded to picket Buckskin, marking the spot well, so that he would have no difficulty in finding it again in case he wanted the broncho in a hurry.

Then he crept toward the camp.

Probably the fellows had posted a vidette, feeling uneasy because of the conditions that governed their actions.

And that sentry would have orders to shoot on sight any suspicious moving object in the grass.

Karl knew all this, but he did not intend that the keen eyes of this guardian of the camp should discover a fellow of his size.

His prairie training could be depended on to carry him through.

"Why, even a greenhorn might crawl close to the fire without being found out, if he wanted to know what was doing," Karl contemptuously declared to himself.

His tour of investigation gave him all the information he desired.

Jasper was there, and Caleb Cross, together with a second cowboy who had been chased off the range by Mr. Kelly on account of some mean work he had done, and who evidently cherished an ugly spirit toward the ranchman ever since. The other two Karl did not appear to know, but, judging from their evil looks, he set them down as bad men, equal to almost any deed, from holding up a stagecoach to looting a poor widow's shack in search of hidden treasure.

And Polly was there!

His heart bled for the girl, she looked so utterly dejected, holding her head between her hands and staring painfully into the fire.

Karl would have liked very much to have given her some signal to arouse her spirits, and tell her of his presence, but he was fearful lest so sudden a change in her appearance might arouse the suspicions of her captors, and thus lead to a search of the vicinity, ending in his discovery and capture.

From the looks of the fellows, Karl knew what sort of treatment he might expect at their hands,

and he was grimly resolved to make a sturdy resistance ere allowing them to overpower him.

Long he lay there in the grass watching what went on.

The coffee had a pungent odor that was very tantalizing to a hungry boy, and then the meat they cooked in a frying pan, bacon it seemed to be, still further excited his appetite.

How long would they stay here?

The folly of delay was well-known to them, but there was some recompense in the fact that their horses were recuperating, nor was a rest to be sneered at on their own part.

In imagination Karl could see Kelly and his eager band of cowboys moving steadily along over the prairie, following the trail with that wonderful skill known only to those whose lives have always been in close sympathy with nature.

He did not forget to watch the men closely, knowing how much depended on it.

They were plainly uneasy, being aware of the fact that they had taken their lives in their hands in thus braving the ranch owner.

Frequently their restless eyes glanced this way and that, scanning the grass about the camp, as though fearful lest it might hold an enemy.

Once Karl saw a pair of rat-like orbs belonging to Caleb Cross fastened intently upon the spot where he lay.

"That feller's on to me," he muttered.

Perhaps some slight movement on Karl's part had caught the other's attention.

Presently the man arose, stretched himself and walked out of camp on the opposite side.

Karl was not deceived in the least; he knew to a dead certainty the fellow intended circling around and investigating matters.

It would be poor policy on his part to remain

there and invite discovery; he at once began to back away, arranging the grass as he went, so as to cover his tracks as much as possible.

"Guess he'll have nothing to show for his pains," grinned Karl.

At a safe distance the prairie boy awaited developments.

It was not long before he saw the man searching the grass, pistol in hand, and could chuckle with satisfaction when Caleb gave it up as a bad job, retiring to where the rest sat.

"Lucky I didn't wait," commented Karl. "If I had—Pist! All up with me!"

An hour passed.

It was all too short for Karl, who would have detained the five worthies where they were until dawn if he were able.

He knew what was up when he saw Jasper rise from the recumbent position he had taken and point to the moon far overhead and reaching down the western heavens.

It was once more forward toward the Bad Lands, where the chances of giving any possible pursuers the slip would be doubled.

Karl had reason to be downcast, for he had just discovered a slight opportunity to strike a telling blow for the cause, and, given half an hour, might have carried it into execution.

This concerned a stampede of the stock.

Could he by any means make away with their mounts, the abductors of Polly must find themselves in a pretty pickle, since it would be impossible by hook or crook to travel far before the avenging cowboys' arrival on the scene.

The horses had been hobbled, and for a time stuck close to the fire, but by degrees wandered a little further away in search of better grass.

It was exasperating that the opportunity came

just when Jasper decided it was time to mount and be off.

Grumbling in an undertone at the miserable luck of the thing, Karl was forced of necessity to run back to where Buckskin had been left, so that he might be in a condition to take up the chase.

A disappointment ten times as big as this was not going to disconcert or discourage him—indeed, his temperament was such that it really served to strengthen his resolution to keep on to the end.

Perhaps Caleb Cross would not be able to quite get out of his mind the fancy that he had seen a face back of the grass.

It might make him suspicious and cause him to glance frequently to the rear, so that he would be in a position to discover the boy should the conditions favor his being outlined on a rise against the sky.

This was just what did happen.

Those in advance, of course, did not know who their indefatigable pursuer was, but took immediate pains to baffle his design.

There were various ways to do this, and they neglected the easiest, which was for one of them to slip down, hide in the grass, and shoot the horseman as he came up.

Karl was compelled to keep so far in the rear that he was unaware of the trick that was being played until an opportunity came to sight those he followed.

To his intense dismay, not to say disgust, he discovered them to be but three in number, the other couple, together with the girl, had utterly vanished from the scene.

Karl knew there was no necromancy about the affair; he had simply been outwitted that was all, being utterly unaware as to when and where the division had taken place.

Naturally, he had followed the noisy party, leaving the others to slip away unmolested.

Chagrin gave him a bad five minutes of it, during which he wrestled with the problem.

It was now utterly out of the question that he could retrace his steps and take up the other trail, since he had no knowledge whatever as to where the separation had occurred.

The only thing that remained was to continue after the trio of rascals.

Surely they would sooner or later all come together again, so that if he could keep on their track sufficiently long he was bound to again look upon Polly's sweet face.

That determined him.

Besides, the odds were not so tremendous now, and if it came to a fight he might be able to hold up the honor of X bar X.

He kept poor Buckskin at it everlastingly, and the game little beast stuck to his colors.

The moon went down.

Here came an interval of almost two hours ere dawn, and it was now Karl feared lest he be left in the lurch.

If the fellows would only draw rein and take a rest; but they seemed determined to lead him a dance he would never forget, perhaps kill poor Buckskin in the bargain.

The men he followed were no novices at this sort of business, and with the darkness to aid them, could find ample means of slipping away in a new direction.

Twice Karl's sagacity saved him from being left at the post, but it was practiced once too often, and the Sunset Ranch outfit went down to defeat.

At least, he felt that he had striven to the last, and his ship had sunk with colors flying.

When Karl drew his weary horse up, and, sitting in the saddle, strove in vain to hear some sound that

would indicate the direction whence his quarry had escaped, he felt exceedingly dejected.

Hope had sustained him through all the hours of this terrible chase.

And now even that was gone.

'All had been in vain.

Those he had chased would come together again at some prearranged rendezvous far up in the broken country, where desperadoes always found a retreat, and Jasper could go where he pleased with poor little Polly.

Never in all his life had defeat so galled the prairie-born boy.

He had some wisdom left, however, and knew it was folly to go roaming about in search of these human Jack-o'-lanterns, who might be here, there or anywhere.

The only thing to be done was to camp on the spot until daylight allowed him to see the trail, and then persistently follow on, no matter where it led.

Buckskin was glad, at least, of a respite, and Karl himself needed rest.

Without a bite of food he dropped upon the prairie, and, despite the worry that naturally filled his mind, was quickly in the Land of Nod, reveling in the slumber of exhaustion.

It was broad day when he awoke, somewhat refreshed; the eastern heavens gave token of the day king's coming, and all nature seemed bright and cheerful.

A slight hoar frost was on the grass blades, telling how keen the air had become in the last hour before dawn.

Karl felt somewhat stiff from his work and the exposure; but that was a mere trifle, hardly worth mentioning to one who, like himself, had served his time as night wrangler when the storm raged over the range, and who had fought through many a

blizzard to save the imperiled cattle placed in his charge.

His first act was to top the nearest rise and sweep the surrounding prairie with eager eyes.

Disappointment followed, for, while a few antelopes were seen here and there, not a sign of a human being came under his observation.

Nothing remained but the trail.

Could he ever find that?

First of all he marked the spot where he had slept, so that he might not wander away; then a systematic search was commenced, beginning in the quarter he considered it most likely he would find traces of the trio.

It took him all of twenty minutes to succeed, and he was almost wretched with suspense and doubt when finally he came upon the trail.

Without further delay he made a start.

Evidently the boy possessed all the elements that go to make up a good trailer—caution, dogged perseverance and a quick eye.

At the same time he deplored the great start gained by the fugitives, and also the fact that, try as he would, the chances were they were gaining on him constantly.

He was hungry enough to eat any old thing without question, nor could he much longer stand the strain.

Two hours after sunrise he sighted a single horseman ahead, riding in such a way as to cross his path.

The bold lad who had followed five determined rascals mile after mile was not apt to turn aside on account of a lone rider, even if he was on the border of that country that had long served as a hiding place and nest for the vipers who had been scourged out of the border settlements.

So Karl never swerved an inch, but kept along the trail of the three horses.

Perhaps he took a wise precaution to loosen the little gun in its case, so that it might be ready for a hurry call. Your cowboy is always very particular about speed when it counts so much to get the drop on a fellow supposed to be equally expert in handling his firearms.

As he drew nearer he discovered that the lone horseman was no outlaw or cowboy, but an Indian.

Then something familiar about his get-up caught Karl's eye; he looked closer, holding his breath for eagerness, and then gave a shrill yell of actual delight.

For it was no other than Little Buckshot, son of a great chief, whom he had defeated in the horse race and later on saved in the blizzard.

This was rare luck, indeed, that these two of all boys should come together at this exact place on the almost limitless prairie.

Such things have happened in most lives, as though ordered by some special decree of fortune.

Karl was delighted to see the young Sioux. It had been a dreary task, this tracking the three horsemen all alone, and he welcomed the advent of one upon whom he could place so great dependence as Little Buckshot.

"How!" cried the Indian, as they drew rein.

Karl reached for his hand.

"I'm right down glad to see you, Little Buckshot. Tell me, haven't you got anything to eat? I'm 'bout starved and can't stop to shoot game."

"Some pemmican mebbe—not much—chew hard, taste good, ugh," replied the other, Indian-like, showing no desire to ask questions, though he must have been devoured with curiosity to know why a thoroughbred like Karl should go hungry on the prairie with game so plentiful, and he so great a Nimrod.

While he munched Karl began to explain:

"See that trail yonder?"

"Um, me see. Two, three horse. White men ride 'em, you bet," grunted the other.

How he could jump to this conclusion on the spur of the moment Karl did not ask. He knew there were many signs as legible to the trained eye of an Indian as print would be to an educated scholar.

"Yes, three bad white men. There were five. They stole Polly, the girl who gave you that blanket you have on your horse."

The Indian frowned.

Polly had quite touched his heart by her gentle manner, her sunny disposition and laughing eyes.

By the way he gripped the repeating gun Cuthbert had presented him with, it was evident that Little Buckshot deemed this abduction a personal affair, and that Karl could count on his assistance.

The story was soon told.

Though still hardly more than a boy, he would be a chief some day, and knew how to carry himself with becoming dignity.

"Trail no good; lose um in the hills. Take too much time, mebbe. Little Buckshot know where find thieves. Trust all to him, and we come out good. Straight as crow fly—two days p'raps. You go with me, Karl?"

"You bet I will, as fast as my poor tired nag can carry me. But be sure you're right. A mistake might ruin us all."

"No mistake—you see. Bet rifle me take you where girl Polly am. No fear."

The confident tone in which this was spoken inspired Karl anew.

Besides, that ancient strip of pemmican tasted amazingly good, and renewed his flagging energies like magic.

"Well, this is what I call luck, anyway. Two can do it better than one, and besides, somewhere over

yonder there's a band of keen-eyed cowboys moving up, eager to stretch hemp with the gang. Take your bearings, then, and lead off, Indian."

The Sioux lad looked at him affectionately.

"Little Buckshot never forget that night in snow. Ugh! No fail, you see. Two days, no more, then we find um. Good. You come, this time me lead."

And when once more Karl urged his bronco forward it was with a satisfaction beyond expression, for his appetite had in a measure been appeased, and he was no longer single-handed in the dangerous game.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RAID ON THE BAD LANDS.

Little Buckshot was as good as his word.

The second day they were in the midst of the Bad Lands, and moving slowly forward, since they must be near the headquarters of the lawless spirits into whose power poor Polly had fallen.

So accurate had been the predictions of this dusky ally with whom Karl was now associated that on this second day they actually came upon a trail of six ponies leading in the same direction whence they themselves were bound; and among the confused tracks the keen-eyed prairie boy immediately picked out the hoof prints of Polly's little nag.

Later on they found where this animal and one other had started off at right angles from the main bunch.

Evidently Jasper and his charge wished to part company with the choice companions who had thus far been a bulwark of strength to the daring cause he represented.

And yet Karl was not greatly surprised when a few hundred yards further on they once more discovered the hoofprints of the outlaws.

The young Sioux explained the seeming mystery in his laconic, matter-of-fact way.

"Ugh! He think him go away with um Polly—bime-by others change mind, follow up and no let go. How!"

Karl could guess the secret of those confused tracks, and it depressed his spirits.

The lawless fellows, after taking Jasper's money for lending assistance had conceived a sudden idea that possibly the girl might be worth her weight in

gold to them if they kept her a prisoner. Some careless boast on the part of the kidnapper must have given them a clew which led to this result.

At any rate, it was a keen disappointment to our Karl, who, when he found there might be only old Jasper to deal with had indulged in high hopes of coping with the emergency, and now saw these ambitions telescoped. This was his first trip to the Bad Lands. As a usual thing honest men avoided this noted section of the country.

It held forth little inducements for a visit, and there must always be a certain amount of danger connected with such a journey, since it afforded a secure asylum for the desperate characters who had been driven out of the border settlements and mining camps, not to say occasional Indians away from their reservations and looking for trouble.

Little Buckshot had been here when upon some of the forays in which he had indulged previous to his change of heart toward the palefaces, brought about by his rescue in the blizzard by the two white boys.

He knew the wild country well.

Even Old Sile could hardly have given him points in this connection.

The day was almost spent.

They were making slow progress, for several good reasons. In the first place, their ponies had covered many miles since early dawn, and really needed a chance to recuperate; then, again, according to the Indian, they had now drawn near their journey's end and would have to exercise considerable caution lest their presence become known in the stronghold of the outcasts, a calamity that could not but work to their disadvantage.

"Watch trail," said Little Buckshot, suddenly.

Karl peered down at the tracks.

"Nothing new here," he said.

"No mean that. Keep tally. Un'stand?"

"Oh, yes; you want me to notice the trail as we go along."

The Indian nodded.

"We come Polly p'rhaps. Shoot me—you get 'way. Where? Not know. See?"

"That's right, Buckshot," exclaimed Karl. "'Twould be a mighty bad business for me if anything was to happen to you; but it'd be kinder harder on my luck if I was to rescue Polly and then not know the way back to home."

"Watch trail," repeated the Indian, laying his finger on his lips.

And together they moved on in silence.

Karl shuddered at the prospect around him; it was all so vastly different from the grassy plains where life abounded and where it seemed so easy to breathe. Here gloomy rocks surrounded them and only ghostly buzzards or skulking, piratical coyotes could be seen. It was the land of death, avoided by every animal worthy of the name of game, a fitting abode for evil spirits who had cheated the border Judge Lynch of his dues, a place of refuge whence they could sally forth at intervals to pounce upon some unlucky caravan and secure plunder.

Karl believed it would give him the nightmare, and that it must be a long time ere he could shake off the chill which these dreary surroundings cast upon his usually buoyant spirits.

At the same time there was not the slightest change in his determination.

He was ready to undertake any risk, however great, in order to accomplish the task of rescuing Polly.

Not once did he consider the romantic side of the business. All he had in mind was that Polly was here against her will, and her appearance indicated how unhappy she felt.

Karl cared to know nothing further.

He realized the risk full well.

These choice spirits counted a human life of little moment when it interfered with any plan or pleasure they had in view.

No doubt they would even take delight in sacrificing such a chap as himself if caught in the act of spying upon their community.

While the two strange friends jogged along over these leagues of space they had held occasional brief conversations upon the subject that was of especial moment to them.

Karl found the Indian a keen reasoner. His native wit, aided by severe experience, combined to make him see matters clearly when grave peril overshadowed the future.

Of course it was taken for granted that all this while a pack of eager-eyed and reckless cowboys must be following the trail, and would, sooner or later, bring up at the outlaw rendezvous.

If this were the case the two boys had better postpone their attack, while picking up all the information possible, until a junction with the cow punchers could be effected.

Little Buckshot was so grave and confident that he inspired Karl with some of his spirit, and the latter anxiously awaited the hour when they could put their plans into operation.

So the night found them, still moving on, their weary journey near its end.

The Indian led his companion to a spot where they could picket their ponies.

It seemed especially designed for such a purpose, being a little *cul de sac* on one side of the trail, surrounded by great bowlders, yet offering fair pasturage.

Less than a mile lay between them and the outlaw camp.

"We stay here," said the Indian. "Sleep with

eyes open. Un'stand? Morning start—save Polly—no shoot if can help.”

“I don't know,” commented Karl, “I'm for knocking that old rascal, Jasper what's his name, on the head.”

“No wise. Too many. They kill us. Then poor Polly.”

And the expression on the brown face made Karl stretch out his hand impulsively.

“Buckshot,” he said, “you're the best Indian 't ever lived. I'm not going to try to tell you what I think of you for doing this. I jest couldn't do it. But I'm grateful, Buckshot.”

And he shook the brown hand with a sincerity that left no room for doubt.

Then they flung themselves down on the sparse grass, and lying there with the stars above and dead silence around, save for the weird sighing of the night wind among the rocks, the two boys chewed pemmican and indulged in serious reflections.

When the time was up, according to the thinking of the Indian, he arose to his feet with a grunt.

Karl eagerly followed his example, anxious to have a first view of this queer camp or settlement of castaways in the Bad Lands.

He had heard many stories about it from Old Sile and others whom some freak of fortune had thrown up against the evil spirits haunting this region, and up to now such a thought as his ever beholding the place had never entered Karl's mind.

These yarns, sometimes embellished to a great extent by the love for magnifying adventures, had surrounded the place with an interest and mystery even beyond what it might naturally present.

Perhaps something was due to the manner in which the Indian had led through the rugged country, avoiding the regular trail, where a vidette might

have been run across; but, at any rate, they experienced no difficulty in advancing.

Once Little Buckshot came to a sudden pause, with his hand on Karl's arm.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Me lead. Follow close; no lose me."

Then he began to make a little detour, with Karl in his wake.

There was no mystery about the matter to Karl, since his ears had also detected the sudden locust-like whirr of a rattlesnake's warning.

It seemed, indeed, a fit resort for this venomous reptile, enemy of man and beast, with carrion crows, buzzards and coyotes for company.

Now lights gleamed ahead, coming from campfires, a strange enough spectacle amid such bleak and gloomy surroundings.

Ten minutes later the boys had crawled close enough to the settlement to look down with wonder and surprise on the strange scene.

There were some cabins, horses in a corral, and a prairie schooner or two, possibly the fruits of former raids.

Women and children were to be seen, showing that some of the lazy, desperate spirits of the camp were men of families, but, as might have been expected, these females were frowsy-headed and slatternly dressed, fit companions for the rough elements gathered in this strange community, bound together simply by their fear and hatred of the law.

Supper was being cooked.

Karl had memories of other scenes, and had Cuthbert been present he might have been reminded of the Sioux village, though this place and its denizens lacked most of the picturesque effects that made that other attractive.

"There's Polly!" cried Karl, at length.

The Indian was already watching her.

Karl looked keenly at her for a minute, then he said:

"Don't look overmuch like a prisoner, does she, Buckshot?"

"Me think she wise gal," said the Indian.

"What, for making the best of it? I guess you're right. She's not sitting there moping or crying, as most any girl might. Reckon, Buckshot, you've got the proper idea. She's too much sense to waste time on that kind of thing."

"Berry wise gal," repeated the Indian, solemnly.

When Karl first discovered the little maiden she was busily engaged over a fire, cooking something for her uncle's supper, and the dexterous manner in which she handled a frying pan over an open blaze was positive proof that she had done this same thing many times before when they two were nomads, drifting where fortune seemed to beckon.

Karl felt easier.

She was not injured, then, and the game could wait a while until reinforcements arrived.

New courage took root in his heart.

The male members of this socialistic community were of various stripes and patterns, from the cowboy and miner, down to the dark-faced Mexican with his fiercely-pointed mustache, his gold-braid embroidered velvet jacket, silver-button decorated trousers and broad sombrero.

Fear of justice makes strange bedfellows, and among these rougher elements Karl discovered a couple of sleek-looking fellows, one of whom had a clerical and the other a legal aspect.

The boys watched all that went on with intense interest.

That they should be in such close touch with the settlement that had so long been the dread of the border, defying attack, and offering a ready refuge to every scoundrel fleeing from the reward of his

misdeeds, was something of more than average importance, something of which they might well boast in future days, when telling, around the peaceful camp-fire, the story of their adventurous quest.

It was of prime importance that they learn all about the settlement, so that when the hour for business arrived they might be prepared to strike with telling effect.

The first and most vital point was to mark the tepee, or hut, in which Polly was to find shelter.

Then the corral engaged their attention, as it contained many horses that had, from time to time, been stolen from the various ranches, and such a fact necessarily appealed to the cowboy spirit that predominated in Karl.

There was another reason why they should desire to know the ins and outs of that stockade; should no assistance arrive, and the work of rescue be thrown entirely upon their young shoulders, it might become necessary for them to cover their flight as Cuthbert should have done when he quitted the Sioux village, by a general stampede of all the animals connected with the settlement, which would delay pursuit and give the fugitives a better chance of getting away.

This survey might be the more easily accomplished when the hour grew later, and sleep had overcome the now noisy denizens of the camp.

So they quietly crept away, sought a retired nook and took a much-needed nap themselves.

The Indian awoke his companion.

Karl glanced up at the moon.

"Why, it must be long after midnight!" he exclaimed, "and yet I can't believe I've slept more than a few minutes."

But, according to Buckshot, it was time they were on the jump if they hoped to accomplish any scouting that night.

Little Buckshot pointed to clouds that were rolling up from the horizon.

"Mebbe heap rain; we get wet; no care if bad white men keep in tepee. Good. You come, Karl; soon see how corral made. We make much s'prise, when let horses go, sometime p'raps."

That was how the dusky aborigine put it directly. Like all of his race he was sparing of his words, and always hewed close to the line.

Karl understood it well enough.

What was a ducking to a cowboy, if the rain promised to make their task easier and lessened the chances of discovery?

By the time they reached the vicinity of the settlement the moon was obscured, and a state of semi-darkness fell upon the land.

Thus it was well they had made a careful survey of the place while the opportunity lasted, since it might prove to their advantage now.

The corral was partly natural, though human hands had heaped up one line of great rocks that shut the animals in.

Daily they had to be taken to pasturage in some nearby oasis in this desert.

The gate was a sturdy, though rude affair, and was never kept locked in any way, as not a soul ever dreamed of danger menacing their live stock here.

After a thorough examination, the boys were satisfied they could accomplish the task of turning the horses out; it would only require an hour's work to remove that portion of the wall most distant from the settlement, through which breach the stampede could be effected.

As yet the rain had not descended, and, feeling that they could do no more in this quarter until the coming of another night, they decided to withdraw quietly.

They had no particular anxiety in connection with

their mounts; for the animals could secure enough food, and there was only a remote chance of their being discovered by some stroller from the village.

There was now no necessity for their remaining in the open to accept a wetting when the rain came; even such toughened characters as cowboys, if given a choice, prefer a dry jacket.

"Cave. Ha, good!" whispered the Indian, patting his dusky body. Me 'member. Me take you. Not far. Wait there—to-morrow night we come 'gain. Then—ugh!"

"Well, then," cried Karl, joyfully, "if this cave's around, by all means——"

But already the Indian was leading the way to the underground retreat, and Karl had his work cut out to follow his long-legged companion.

It was already sprinkling, with a promise of a more serious downfall shortly, so that the tramp to the cave was lively enough.

Karl had spent many a night in shack and dugout, so that this prospect was not of a nature to give him the least concern—indeed, too many times had he lain with only a blanket as protection against a pelting rain, so that shelter of any sort was a bonanza in his eyes.

At last the young brave drew Karl into what seemed a crack or fissure in the rocky wall.

It was none too soon, as the big drops had increased, and now came down with a merry tune that pleased Karl better because he could laugh at its futile efforts to reach them.

Little Buckshot had stooped down.

"Hole small—have to crawl, Karl—but we find um big lodge, you see."

And Karl kept after him, quite satisfied that in meeting the Indian he had struck the best bit of luck imaginable.

Sure enough, the crooked passage did grow

larger, and presently Karl was possessed of the conviction that they had entered a chamber of some sort.

In anticipation of this, the Sioux had picked up some bits of wood while *en route*, although dead branches of trees were scarce enough in this desolate region, where vegetation seemed to grow only under protest, and then of a stunted and gnarled variety.

Karl had hold of the Indian's heel.

He figured that they had passed some yards into the chamber, and was wondering why his companion did not speak or make a move toward gaining his feet, when a low growl reached his ear that sent a cold chill through his heart, since he realized on the instant that they had, in thus entering the hole in the wall, invaded a wild beast's den.

Whether the animal were wolf, panther or big grizzly bear could only be guessed, but each possibility had lurking in it all the chances of desperate adventure the boldest spirit could wish.

Little Buckshot no longer advanced.

The growl came from one side, and doubtless his head was immediately turned in that quarter.

Karl heard him give a grunt.

There was no exclamation of surprise, no expression of alarm. These things were not suited to a young warrior who had proven his right to wear the war feather by means of the rigid methods of his tribe, whereby his endurance and power to stand acute pain had been thoroughly tested.

"What is it?" whispered Karl, fumbling for his gun in true cowboy fashion; for that weapon is the prairie rover's stay in almost every time of trouble.

"Me see um eyes. Wait; can soon tell. Ugh! him bear, I think," came the reply, with no quaver in the voice.

"A grizzly, no doubt. Shall we get out?" asked Karl, not relishing the prospect.

In his mind a fight with old Ephraim at close quarters was bad enough in the daytime, when there were chances to operate his gun successfully; but the same engagement in the darkness of an unknown cavern—why, it made his flesh creep to even think of it.

"Mebbe can find hole out; mebbe not. Think best fight," came the reply.

It was the ambitious soul of a warrior, eager to win fresh laurels, that spoke.

No doubt, Little Buckshot was always ready, after the manner of his kind, to accept considerable chances in an affair of this sort, having as an incentive the great glory that would be his portion could he but secure a necklace of grizzly bear claws with which to adorn his person.

Such a coveted trophy is worn by but few, and stamps the owner as a renowned hunter, utterly fearless in the chase, and worthy of all honor among his fellows.

Karl was free to confess that had he been given his choice he would much rather have decamped, and allowed the growling beast full liberty to occupy his den. Even a wet jacket might not be so bad when compared to torn, lacerated flesh in a desperate conflict with this most terrible "old man of the mountains."

But there was the Indian, quite undaunted, and actually welcoming the threatening danger as though it fulfilled a dream in which he had indulged. No true cowboy could allow a redskin to outdo him in daring; he would never respect himself again if this occurred.

So, crushing this desire to give Eph. a wide berth, and leave him undisputed monarch of the cave, he

drew alongside the crouching Indian and whispered in his ear:

“If we have to fight, let’s go at the business in a common-sense way. We must have a light first of all.”

“Good! Karl, you know. Heap wood here; take some, make fire mebbe. Me watch.”

And the only weapon he held in his hand while thus ready to invite the desperate onslaught of a monster grizzly was a naked hunting knife!

Karl was staggered by such a reckless spirit; he never could fully understand Indian character—it had so many contradictory elements.

It was, however, no time for juggling with the question, for there was old Eph. growing more furious every second over this unwarranted intrusion, and ready to launch himself upon those who had disturbed his solitude.

Karl’s fingers trembled a little as he arranged the handful of fat pine splinters so that they would immediately flame up when he applied the lighted match.

His heart was almost in his throat as he could in imagination see the slight figure of the Indian lad between himself and the beast, awaiting on one knee and with uplifted knife the expected attack.

Then came the crisis, when he drew the match along the stone, and, as the flame sprang up, applied it to the resinous pine. There was a flash of fire, and the inky darkness of the cave was almost instantaneously dispersed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STAMPEDE.

The savage growls ceased when the fat pine splinters burst into a blaze. It was as though the sudden illumination had somewhat startled old Ephraim.

Karl did not dare take his attention away from the new-born fire until his deft fingers had arranged a supply of small sticks which would be apt to keep the blaze going.

Although this only consumed some seconds of time, it seemed ages to the boy, wild to turn his attention toward that spot from whence had come those blood-curdling growls.

When he did look finally, the sight was quite sufficient to fill him with awe.

Such a grizzly monster he had never set eyes on before; indeed, it seemed impossible that he could have entered by the same channel they had employed, so great was his bulk.

This ungainly beast was only momentarily awed by the fire. Then his ferocious temper once more asserted its dominion over his fears.

In the presence of man he recognized his deadliest foe.

Growls again awoke the echoes of the queer hole in the wall, and the monster's front was fierce beyond expression.

Meanwhile Karl had been saying nothing and sawing wood. With him every second counted, and a false move might prove destructive, so he fed the fat pine splinters to the little fire until it was robust enough to seize upon heavier material and consume it.

So it chanced that this delay and hesitation on Bruin's part was of tremendous value to the cause of the allies.

The very second Karl believed his fire was in a condition to feed itself he ceased his delicate manipulation, and turned his attention toward the quarter where danger lurked.

It was high time.

Old Eph. had finally worked himself up into a rousing temper, and decided to make a rush, beside which any college cane contest or football game must appear trifling.

He gave plain warning of his intention by a roar that sounded like a burst of thunder.

"You, Karl, look out!" shouted the Indian lad, in a piercing tone of voice.

Karl felt that his hour had come.

If ever his gun was to do him good service, that time was now.

Considering the nature of the danger that menaced him, his hand was remarkably steady as he threw the revolver up on a line with the advancing form of his bulky adversary, and began firing.

It seemed as though pandemonium had broken loose, what with the sharp detonations of the gun, the hoarse roars of rage and pain to which Bruin gave vent, and the shrill cries uttered by the excited Indian.

Through it all that blessed fire crackled and burned most cheerily, giving the illumination that allowed Karl to send his lead where it was apt to do the most good.

The bear seemed staggered, as though hard hit.

Karl knew better than to cease firing, for had he not seen such a monster fight like a demon with all of twenty bullets in him?

Bruin had come to a stop; he pawed the air much

like a prize fighter who has been somewhat dazed by a hard blow.

"All up. Me finish um!" cried the Indian. "Spoils for me. He no harm now. Watch."

"Look out!" yelled Karl. "The feller's not dead by a long way, and if you get within reach of him he'll—— Ah! you'll be careful next time!"

Little Buckshot made the mistake of believing the monster had received his death wound, and, filled with the desire to have a hand in the game, so that he might wear the honors in the shape of a bear's claws necklace, he swooped down upon Bruin, knife in hand.

Once, twice, thrice, did he thrust his steel blade into the hairy side of the grizzly, and then received a blow that sent him spinning like a teetotum or a Dancing Dervish to the other side of the cavern.

"Now, it's my turn again, I suppose," said Karl.

Two shots more and he would be done.

If they failed to finish the game, it threatened to be a most serious business indeed.

The bear was once more advancing. Not so rapidly as at first, since these various wounds appeared to have weakened him considerably.

Once, twice, the gun was discharged.

At the same time, Little Buckshot, recovering from the shock and astonishment caused by his sudden, dizzy fling, rushed forward once more to the attack, burning to give old Bruin as good as he sent.

As luck would have it the bear, in making his groggy advance, floundered through the midst of the cheery little fire, sending its elements in every direction, and a state of semi-darkness added its horrors to the situation.

Karl had dropped his now useless gun and fallen back upon that last defense of the prairie man at bay—his hunting knife.

He knew the bear was upon him, with terrible

claws that could rend garments and flesh into ribbons, once they got to work.

"It's all up with me!" he cried.

It was in desperation that Karl began to ply his knife as soon as his hand came in contact with a hairy side. Then he, too, received a stunning blow from one of the swinging forepaws of the beast, and measured his length upon the hard stone floor.

Half dazed by the concussion, Karl lay there, expecting to feel the fierce embrace of his ferocious enemy.

To his surprise, the sounds of conflict appeared to drift to the other side of the cavern. He could hear the feeble growls of Bruin, coupled with fierce, exultant whoops of Little Buckshot, who seemed to be dancing around his exhausted and almost helpless enemy, inflicting a new wound whenever able to do so without coming within dangerous reach of those terrible claws.

Karl drew himself together.

His first thought was gratitude that he had escaped so lightly.

Then he felt around for his knife, that had been knocked from his hand in the tumble, eager to go to the assistance of his ally.

Ere he could discover the weapon, however, a dreadful stillness had come upon the cavern. Karl was horrified.

"Guess that bear's dead," he muttered; "but is it all up with Little Buckshot, too?"

Eagerly the boy crept around, gathering the still-glowing embers of the late fire together.

Then he bent down and blew his breath upon them until at length they burst into a sudden flame that dissipated the darkness and rendered the cavern almost as light as day.

With awe and a great fear tugging at his heart,

our Karl looked toward that quarter whence had come the last sounds of conflict.

What he saw was a shaggy mass of bear seated astride of which was the panting and triumphant Little Buckshot, who could only grin and gasp the one expressive word:

“How!”

It was well!

Victory had, indeed, perched upon their banner, and to these lads had fallen an adventure that might make them envied by old hunters.

When Karl viewed the mighty bulk of their fallen foe, and felt the cruel points of his long claws, he could not but feel that the fortunes of war had favored them highly.

Of course, the first thing in order was to call the roll, and ascertain what the cost of victory had been.

A few bruises fell to Karl's share, and he considered that he had escaped very luckily, considering what might have occurred.

The Indian was also bruised, and had received numerous scratches that bled, and looked ugly to Karl; but Little Buckshot seemed to take the greatest pride in his wounds, as though they cemented his claim to the coveted claws.

And he had well earned the trophies.

Karl proceeded to put his gun in serviceable condition, as there was no knowing when it might be again called upon for service.

When, out of curiosity, he later on examined the defunct bear to discover where he had planted his lead, he found every bullet had lodged in Bruin's body, and that, given a little time, they must have brought about his death, which fact was honor enough for Karl.

Exhausted, he made preparations for sleep, having his blanket on his back.

“Me no sleep—not yet,” said the Indian.

"And why not?" demanded Karl.

"Good reason," said Little Buckshot, with a glance at the bear.

"What! You're not afraid of a dead bear, are you?"

"No; um dead, all right."

"Of course he is."

"Me get his claws. Show big chief. Ugh! Wear um—beautiful necklace—fall down, worship me."

Karl laughed boisterously.

"Another case of 'alone I did it,' I suppose, as Cuthbert would say. Ah, well, let him have the glory, I guess I want a rest more'n anything else."

And the last glimpse Karl had of the Indian he was industriously at work severing the toes of the once mighty monarch of American beasts.

The hole in the wall afforded the two young allies a secure refuge through the following day.

Once Little Buckshot crept out to take the stiffness from his wounded limbs, but he did not venture near the retreat of the desperate characters who had made their stronghold in this wild, forsaken land, contenting himself with a trip to the inclosure where Buckskin and the Indian pony had been left picketed.

They were still there, and had apparently not been discovered by any roving outlaw.

The hours dragged to Karl.

He was utterly weary of tough old pemmican, and endeavored to make a dish that would be somewhat more palatable by cooking the last of the Indian's scanty allowance.

After this they would have to look elsewhere for their meals.

The coming of night was eagerly welcomed, as both of them were anxious to get to work.

It had been decided that if the chances appeared

good they would make a bold bid for fortune ere the turn of another day.

By following the back trail they had hopes of running into the arms of Mr. Kelly and his cowboy band, if so be those worthies were coming to Polly's relief.

Karl was heartily glad to quit the pocket in the wall, and once more breathe the fresh air, to hear the breeze rustle the coloring leaves overhead, and see the bright stars hung high in the heavens.

He realized what a desperate piece of business lay before them, but the spirit of enterprise and determination that had tided him over numerous difficulties in the past again came to the fore, and bolstered up his courage.

It was Polly whom he risked all for; Polly, who seemed as dear to him as a young sister, and whose cruel fate, if left in the midst of these rough elements, was enough to arouse compassion in even a less sympathetic breast than Karl's.

They approached the settlement with great caution.

As on the preceding night, it was a scene of considerable confusion, for the hour of feeding was on.

Karl speedily caught sight of Polly, busily engaged in her culinary labors.

He watched her every move with an eagerness that sprung from genuine concern.

"See here, Buckshot," said Karl, softly; "we got to find a way of letting Polly know we're here and that we're going to get her out of the hands of these fellers."

"How!" ejaculated the Indian.

"Yes, that's just it—how? Set your dusky brains to work and try to figure how we're to reach Polly."

"Me tink one way."

"Well, let's hear it."

"Polly, she woman."

"Yes; what Cuthbert 'd call the hypothesis is correct."

"Woman take bucket—go to spring—get water."

"I see; the spring is on the outskirts of the settlement and you think Polly might be down there getting water."

"Karl he got idee. She come—some time—mebbe—no know. We wait; rocks good shelter—no seen; by'm-by Polly come. Still wait. She alone. No one 'bout. We speak. Polly hear. She un'stand."

"Bully!" cried Karl. "You're a trump card, Buckshot, and the world ain't big enough for us to find gifts for you after we're all out of this mess."

"Um paid already," said the Indian, simply.

And the shudder that shook the brown body showed Karl that Little Buckshot had still with him a lively picture of that night in the snow.

"Let's be off to the spring, then," said Karl.

"You go; me keep watch—me no far 'way. Want me, Little Buckshot there. So?"

"All right," said Karl, and with a nod he was off.

By crawling on hands and knees after the manner of a lynx creeping close to its expected prey he was finally enabled to reach a point not more than ten feet from the spring.

The water gurgled at his feet, and he lay down eagerly enough to quench his thirst.

Then he waited, hoping for the best.

A woman came, bucket in hand, but he made no sound to attract her attention. She seemed a wretched, weary-looking creature, evidently at the beck and nod of a good-for-nothing husband, and dragged with him into his exile.

Later on, a second shuffled up, filled her pail, and, with weary steps, returned to the thankless task of attending to the appetites of the men belonging to her mess.

Polly came at last.

It was evidently hard to crush the little maid's spirits, for she was humming a tune as she bent over to dip her bucket in the clear water of the spring, and Karl was strangely thrilled when he recognized the familiar strain of a song he and Cuthbert had sung in company with her sweet, birdlike voice on many a starry evening, with a tinkling Mexican mandolin for accompaniment.

"Polly!"

The girl ceased humming; she started and raised her head. Karl could see by the firelight that her face was white with an eager apprehension, as though she feared lest hope might have sung falsely to her.

"It's me, Polly—Karl, you know. Don't let on you're listening, for some one might be looking and see what was up. But listen to what I say. Can you hear plainly?"

"Oh, yes, Karl, and I'm so glad. Is Mr. Kelly with you, and Cuthbert?" said the girl, with an eagerness that could not be wholly concealed.

"I'm sorry to say not; but I reckon they're on the road here, all of 'em. You remember the Sioux boy, Little Buckshot? Well, he's here, and we mean to get you out of this fix."

"How good and brave of you, Karl."

"Never mind. That'll do to tell me after we've got you back. We know your hut. Keep awake, and when you hear an owl cry three times, come down here with your bucket. You catch what I mean, Polly?"

He spoke quickly, because there was always a chance of their being interrupted. Indeed, even then he saw a woman, bucket in hand, stop to gossip with another poor slave at a fire, as though about to come for water.

Polly eagerly gave an affirmative reply. She was

quick to grasp the essential details of a situation, thanks to her ready wit.

"We hope to stampede the stock, and so cut off a chase for a time that will give us at least a start."

How her bright eyes beamed when she heard this! Why, a veteran like Old Sile could not have planned a more effective arrangement. She was proud of Karl—proud of the fact that he was her friend, her adopted brother, and that he braved these dangers for her sake.

There was no opportunity to say anything further, for the woman with the pail was coming toward the spring; so, taking up her burden, Polly went back to the fire where her duties demanded attention.

Strangely enough, she sang no more, which might seem singular on the face of it, since her heart must have rejoiced over the fact that the chance of liberty was so bright.

Perhaps the fact that Karl was to risk so much in her behalf gave her uneasiness.

When the opportunity came, Karl once more crawled over to where the Indian lay concealed behind the rocks.

Watching all that took place in the settlement of the bad men, they were able to confer regarding their plans, and make arrangements looking toward their carrying out.

Time crept along heavily enough.

Once the Indian left Karl, and was gone a long while. When he returned he said he had been working on the back of the corral, arranging matters so that the balance of the wall could be easily removed, making a gap through which the horses, if thoroughly alarmed, would push and crowd in wild disorder, scattering through the country beyond, so that it would be a matter of hours ere the first of them could be retaken, while the last might be wandering for days in an alkali desert.

By degrees the village was quieting down.

Karl hoped midnight would find the conditions favorable for their adventure.

The longer time that was to elapse between the stampede and daylight the better chances they would have for escape.

Besides, a spirit of eagerness beset these young crusaders that might have been absent had they been veterans in such work, for youth is ever ardent, and impatient of restraint.

Karl remembered that Cuthbert had suffered the same symptoms of distress when waiting for the Sioux village to lapse into silence.

They killed a little time by crawling around to the corral, where the Indian entered to select a pony for Polly.

This he succeeded in securing, leading the animal out through the breach he had made in the outer wall, and fastening him with a bit of rope to a tree where they could readily find him when the crisis arrived.

All of which, being smartly done, reflected considerable credit upon Little Buckshot, the son of a chief.

And now the time had come when they must put the plan into operation.

Up to this hour no hitch had occurred, but the most serious part of the business was yet to be gone through with, for once the alarm had been given, they knew full well furious men would rush this way and that, only desirous of an opportunity to shoot with deadly aim—men who mocked at the law, and thought it no sin to take human life, if, by so doing, they could at any time advance their own interests.

To the Indian was given the task of sending the signal arranged upon with Polly, and accustomed to mimicry, he would experience no difficulty in imitating the owl that haunted this lonely region so

perfectly that even a suspicious ear might find trouble in discovering the cheat.

This he did ere entering the corral, for he knew his appearance among the ponies, carrying the freshly-taken hide of the grizzly bear, carried for this very purpose, would send the animals, frenzied with fear, to the other end of the rocky stockade, where they must find the breach in the wall and go flying madly over the country beyond.

Karl's heart was almost in his throat as he heard the thrice-told hoot of the owl sound clearly upon the still night air.

"Wonder if Polly'll reply to that?" he questioned. "'Tain't likely, as Polly, tired out, will have fallen asleep."

In that case, as it occurred to Karl, the golden opportunity would be lost, unless one of the boys visited the hut and aroused Polly, for daylight would reveal to the denizens of the desert settlement what material damage had been done to their stockade, and their watchfulness would prevent a successful venture in a similar channel on the succeeding night.

Crouching there, Karl kept his eyes glued upon the cabin in which he knew the girl belonged.

He never knew until then how long even seconds of time might be.

"Polly," he murmured. "Bless her sweet heart!"

Just as he had instructed her, the girl went to the bucket and with the dipper endeavored to secure a drink, as though seized with a thirst that would not be denied.

Since there was not a drop in the pail to satisfy her demands, she took it up and made for the spring.

Karl was trembling with excitement now—so much depended upon whether Polly were allowed to follow out her apparently natural and innocent whim; but, so far as he could discover, no one else

appeared to be moving about the settlement, and hope took an upward bound.

Nearer she came, swinging the pail in the most careless manner possible.

He yearned to step out and meet her, yet realized that such an action might ruin all, or, at least, lessen the chances of success.

Once at the spring, Polly bent over as if to fill her bucket.

The moon showed her figure and face plainly, as there was no covering overhead here.

"Karl!" she said, softly—almost in a whisper.

"I'm here," came the reply.

"What shall I do next?" anxiously.

"Leave your bucket, and come in among the rocks. It's time for the show to begin, I guess."

She was quick to obey; the prospect of leaving this camp of refugees and reprobates, to again take up her happy life at dear old Sunset Ranch was quite enough to thrill Polly to the very heart and hasten her footsteps.

Karl caught her trembling hand in his sturdy grasp, as though he would by the mere contact inspire her with new courage.

"Don't be afraid; everything's going hunky-dory, and the goose hangs high. Now come with me, Polly, dear," he whispered in her ear—the boy element cropping up, in spite of the fact that he had been showing such manly attributes in his work of late.

She was only too delighted to obey, and Karl, still stooping low, led her in the direction where the animal captured from the corral by Little Buckshot was secured.

As yet the stampede had not begun, for it was good policy to delay this last and finishing stroke until some restless movement in the camp made it necessary to act.

Fortune seemed kind, for, while they covered the ground between the camp and the tree to which the horse was fastened there was no sign of an alarm.

All of which pleased the young rescuer more than words could tell. If they escaped the videttes posted by the inhabitants of this lone village in the Bad Lands, all might be well, and their safety assured.

It had been arranged that when he reached the horse the waiting Indian should be notified of the fact, in order that he might begin his dangerous part of the bold enterprise.

That time had arrived, and if success followed Little Buckshot's exertions there would presently be a decided scarcity of stock in that section of the country, since a horse, frightened by the appearance of a dreadful grizzly in its corral, is not likely to stop running short of five miles, once it breaks forth from confinement.

Karl discharged his gun, taking care to hide the flash as much as possible, so that their location might not be discovered.

Immediately there broke out shouts and cries from many throats in the awakened village; but, above all sounded the yells of the young Indian brave in the corral as he swung the freshly-taken bear skin about and sought to arouse in the horses the greatest alarm possible, for this was not Little Buckshot's first stampede.

In this he was successful, for their keen scent discovered the presence of what was to them their most dreadful foe—the grizzly bear.

Karl laughed when he heard the snorts and neighs of wild alarm, mingled with the trampling of hoofs in quickly-accumulating force until it assumed a thunderous roar.

"They're off; it has worked like a charm. Now

let the rascals guess what struck 'em. They'll think the Indians have made a sweep on their live stock, I reckon. Let me lead the horse, Polly, and you walk beside me, for the danger ain't all past yet," said he.

CHAPTER XIX.

SUNSET RANCH.

The noise and confusion increased as the aroused refugees, believing old Standing Elk and a party of his braves had descended upon their live stock as hawks pitch upon a dovecot, and were stampeding the horses, endeavored to outdo one another in shouts and directions that only served to make the hubbub more furious.

Karl was conscious of a wild thrill of exultation as he considered that this tremendous explosion in the camp of the outlaws had been wholly and solely the work of himself and the young Indian buck.

For two boys, they were certainly making their mark in the world at an early stage.

No doubt the aroused desperadoes would have been more angry than alarmed, had they been given an inkling of the truth, since a couple of tender kids were not apt to inspire a great deal of respect in the minds of such toughened and case-hardened characters; but they had heard Little Buckshot whoop like a whole swarm of Sioux braves, and jumped to the conclusion that a dozen, at least, were concerned in the bold raid.

If the excited horses could manage to push and crowd through the opening in the stockade all would be well; there would not be a single nag left for pursuit.

Karl had the utmost faith in his comrade, but, of course, the young Sioux was not beyond making a mistake.

Perhaps he crowded the horses, in his eagerness to rush them through. At any rate, no one could blame him for wishing to make haste, since the set-

tlement was boiling and a lot of furious rustlers would speedily be surrounding the corral, preventing his escape.

Be that as it may, a few horses managed to turn and gallop back toward the gate, though the main body pushed through the fracture in the wall and went careering madly over the alkali desert beyond.

When the Sioux boy darted after the last of them, he was observed by several running men, who took snap-shots at the shadowy figure; but it is no easy task to hit such a flitting, bounding target, seen in the fitful glow of the moonlight, and the dusky stamper escaped scot free.

He was not immediately pursued, because the idea prevailed that a big force of Indians might be in the vicinity, and these cautious outcasts from society knew enough of the Sioux character to suspect an ambush might await such a hazardous rush.

Karl had believed he knew the way to where the horses had been left most thoroughly, but somehow conditions seemed to change the appearance of the country, and several times he was within an ace of losing himself.

This sort of a thing would never do. It meant ruin to all their plans, the recapture of Polly, and a worse fate for himself, if, through ill luck, he fell into the outcasts' hands.

He must brace up, take a new hold and not get off his base again.

By degrees he had been leaving the still stormy settlement far in the lurch, and had reason to believe he must be near the secret little inclosure where Buckskin and the Indian pony had been pocketed.

There was one thing Karl forgot.

The videttes.

Little Buckshot had declared that the members of this outlaw community always kept at least one sen-

try on duty day and night, to report the coming of any force that might be sent into the Bad Lands by the Government, or, possibly, the settlers and ranchmen, irritated beyond endurance by the frequent raids of these lawless characters.

Where this guardian of the camp was posted the Indian had not been able to declare, but believed it must be some place along the trail, which was the main reason he had wished to cache their horses, even when a mile or more away from the village.

So it happened that Karl was fated to make the acquaintance of this fellow in a manner not at all calculated to please him.

Without the least warning, he suddenly found himself face to face with a strapping, big-bearded chap, who surveyed him with astonishment.

The row from the village had, of course, excited his curiosity, and he was debating as to whether he had better remain on deck where he was, or hasten back to the assistance of his allies, when he thus came upon the cowboy, leading a horse, on which was seated a midget of a little woman.

"Halt, thar! What's all this ruction about?" was the way the hairy giant saluted him.

Karl had received a shock at sight of the other, but, with true cowboy instinct, his hand had instantly gone in search of his gun.

"The Indians have stampeded the stock, and I reckon they're cleaning out the whole place. It ain't safe, nohow, and I've concluded to levant—that's all."

He was surprised at himself for the coolness with which he made this reply.

"Injuns, hey? and cleanin' out the stock, be they? Well, the boys hev been jest spilin' fur a scrimmage this long time back, and I've an idee they kin wallop any pesky red varmints as may drop down on 'em.

An' now, who in tarnation be you, and who allowed ye to be running' off with the capten's gal?"

This seemed a poser, but Karl was not in a humor to dally longer. He knew that the suspicions of the giant had been aroused, and that sooner or later it must reach a question of supremacy between them.

As minutes were precious to the fugitives, he believed the sooner he grappled the bull by the horns and met the crisis the better.

"I've got a message for you," he said, to arouse the fellow's curiosity.

"Oh, you be? Well, out with it, kid, afore I tie yer hands together and tote ye back to camp; what's the message?"

"Drop that gun!"

Karl had covered him like a flash. His hand may have trembled a little, but such a thing would not count at close quarters.

In the moonlight, his face looked set and white, and there was an air of determination about his whole person that could not but sensibly affect the one who was threatened.

The giant may have had only contempt for such a little whipper-snapper chap as Karl appeared in his Goliath eyes, but he entertained a healthy respect for a gun in the hands of a range rider.

Consequently, he dared not attempt to make use of the weapon he held, but, realizing that the other meant strictly business, he allowed it to slip from his hands until it landed with a thump on the ground.

At the same time, he growled like a hyena at bay, furious to be thus humiliated by a mere strippling whom he could easily down with one hand tied behind his back.

"Now, turn around—not that way, but headed toward camp. Can you run?" demanded Karl.

"Summat, I reckon, kid?" surlily.

"Then go it at your best pace, for, when I've counted ten, I'm going to shoot, and, if you're within range, down you go. One!"

"See hyar, young feller——"

"Two!"

"But I give ye my word——"

"Three!"

Then the giant lurched forward and began to cover ground as though he were a prize sprinter in a college athletic contest.

When Karl said "ten" he sent a bullet after the roaring vidette, just as he promised. Doubtless, it sung close to his ears, for he bellowed louder than ever.

Since the thing was done, and the camp must presently learn the truth, Karl knew there was no longer any virtue in trying to steal along.

Haste was of prime importance now.

So he urged Polly's pony on, keeping a close lookout for the dead tree that marked the entrance to the little valley.

Perhaps he had been wiser had he made a prisoner of the vidette, and left the fellow bound and gagged upon the spot; but a lack of cord and the time to accomplish such a task had deterred him.

Besides, the giant was hardly the man with whom a stripling like Karl cared to dally any length of time. By a quick movement, he might knock the gun from the cowboy's hand, and then it would be all up with the youngster.

Surely, the place where the horses had been left must be somewhere near.

Karl's heart began to grow cold with serious apprehension. After all he had done, could it be possible he would slip up now?

Soon the enraged bush rangers would be scouring the vicinity in search of him, posted by the giant vidette's report.

Perhaps it would be best for Polly to make off toward the south. She would stand a chance of escape, though the dangers of desert and plain were not pleasant to consider.

It chanced, however, that Polly had a mind of her own, and was able to assert it, for when she heard what Karl was considering, she settled the whole matter by flatly refusing to leave him.

"Besides," she said, as a clinching argument, "I should surely die of fright if night caught me alone on the prairie. No, Karl, the dangers that threaten you must be shared by me. We'll stick together through thick and thin."

And Karl, deep down in his boyish heart, was ready to bless her for those words—"through thick and thin."

Fortunately, at about this time, a shrill whistle sounded near by that startled Polly, but gave Karl the liveliest satisfaction.

"That's the signal of Little Buckshot; bully for him! We're all right, now, Polly. Here's the dead tree, after all, and there he comes with the horses."

Again the situation began to look hopeful, and Karl felt like tossing his hat into the air with one of his old-time cow-puncher yells.

But discretion caused him to refrain, for they were not yet out of the woods.

Buckskin was, of course, delighted to see his beloved master again. He had been giving the Indian boy a little trouble, for it seemed as though the yellow broncho never would get over his antipathy to the race.

How good it seemed to be on his back again! Karl felt as though he could defy any danger, now that he once more bestrode a horse—the old cowboy instinct over again.

"Listen, Karl!" said the young brave, as he fin-

ished fastening the bearskin on the back of his unwilling, dancing pony.

They all bent their ears to catch the sound to which Little Buckshot referred.

"Horses!" said Karl, quickly.

"Come from above. Too bad, not all get clear of corral. Now chase us," grunted the Sioux, guessing, with wonderful instinct, that those of the men who could find mounts were swooping down to ascertain the meaning of the vidette's mad bellowing, and must, therefore, soon learn the truth and be after them, post haste.

Karl knew what this meant—a hot pursuit, perhaps a running battle, and in the end their being brought to bay.

They must take advantage of every second of time, since the outlaws naturally knew the ground much better than the young Indian, and were thus in a position to take advantage of many a crook and turn that would save a few furlongs.

They urged their ponies on as fast as the dangerous nature of the ground would permit, and seemed to be making good time, so that Karl was quite encouraged, until the Indian, with his native sagacity, called a halt in order to determine whether the pursuit were still kept up, as their own steeds made so much noise it was impossible to discover this fact while on the full jump.

Judging from the increased clearness of the noises in their rear the foe was bearing down with a vengeance. Not only had they kept up the pursuit, but were perceptibly gaining.

Then Karl knew the game was up.

By degrees they would be overhauled, simply because they knew less about the trail than those who thundered in their rear.

And, if overhauled, what then?

He shut his teeth hard together, after the manner

of one who refuses to consider the idea of giving up the ship, no matter how dark and dreary the prospect may appear.

One alternative remained, such as a prairie man always keeps in reserve. They must, at the last, drop into the best harbor that came handy and turn upon their hot-footed pursuers.

Perhaps when a little lead came rattling in their midst, the eager desperadoes might change their minds about a sudden assault, and haul off for repairs.

Thus the two boys would be in a position to hold them at bay, in the hope of the arrival of Mr. Kelly's men on the scene.

The flight was resumed.

Little Buckshot had also guessed the true state of affairs by this time, and yet he gave no evidence of such a thing as alarm; Indians have always inherited stoicism that glories in danger and even physical suffering, so that they go to the stake with a song on their lips and defiant words for their enemies.

And he was the son of a chief!

The horses were urged on as swiftly as the nature of the ground permitted.

Again and again the Sioux boy glanced back over his shoulder, since Karl was too busily occupied in looking ahead in order that they might avoid the roughest route.

Little Buckshot was a picture, though he knew it not, clinging to the back of a flying pony, his long, coarse, black hair plucked from its confinement and streaming wildly in the breeze created by his own rapid passage, his bronzed arms and clear-cut features looking as though cut out of brown marble.

In terse sentences he reported what he saw to his companion, but it brought little encouragement, for

the steady-riding pursuers were slowly but surely gaining.

The Indian had made an unhappy choice in a pony for Polly.

Their own animals could have almost made rings about the other beast, under a stress of circumstances, and, as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, they could not go faster than the animal that dragged.

Polly even begged Karl to leave her and seek safety himself, so that he might come again another day with the cowboy band and effect her rescue.

Of course, he scoffed at the idea indignantly, and, with a mocking laugh, cried:

"Through thick and thin, Polly, you said. We sink or swim together."

And Polly endeavored to persuade him no more.

Perhaps she realized what a blessed thing it was to have so sincere and faithful a friend, even if he were only a cowboy. He risked all he had on earth in her behalf—his life—and a prince of the royal blood could do no more.

The pursuers were now drawing so close that Karl knew the chase was near its finish.

He no longer busied himself in endeavoring to find the easiest passage. That were a matter that would presently concern them but little.

What he most desired was to discover some spot where the rocks would form a natural fort, behind which they might take refuge and hold off the eager foe.

That was one advantage possessed by this wild country over the open prairie—it offered a much better chance of defense, for there were places—Karl had seen many of them—where two well-armed and determined men could keep a score at bay.

One thing he could not understand was the utter

silence with which their enemies followed at their heels.

They must know they were gaining all this while, and such a triumph ought to fill them with a wild exultation that would seek an outlet in vociferous shouts.

Could it be they were conscious of the fact that such an outburst would only whip the fugitives into greater exertions?

At any rate, Karl thought it very odd.

Just when a retreat, in which they could find refuge, was most needed, it persisted in remaining out of sight—at least, Karl began to feel something like despair creep over him, as the miles flew by without such a discovery.

He knew the pursuers would not fire upon them unless provoked beyond all endurance, for the presence of Polly granted them this insurance—Polly, who represented something of value in the eyes of their leaders, though Karl himself did not pretend to understand what it meant.

After all, it was the keen hawklike eyes of the Indian boy that lighted upon a promising place of refuge.

A few quick sentences, and he had drawn Karl's attention to the spot.

It offered a promising asylum to the weary fugitives, and could apparently withstand a most vigorous assault.

So their course swerved to the right a little, and they bore down upon the fort.

Upon their arrival they found the place even better situated than they had dreamed of in their most sanguine moments.

Nature had perfected a freak, piling the rocks in a rampart around a little basin not more than thirty feet across, and leaving just one opening through which the horses could press.

They took the place by storm.

Hardly had they gained the inclosure than Little Buckshot landed lightly on his feet.

Karl was hardly a whit behind him; and Polly did not wait to be assisted down, since she had long ago learned to be independent in all matters pertaining to horses at least.

All seemed working as well as they had any reason to expect.

But there was no time now to more than cast one quick glance around.

That look gave Karl renewed confidence, for it showed him the natural strength of this oasis in the desert, apparently destined to become their little Gibraltar.

Seconds counted for much.

The thunder of approaching horses' hoofs was in the air; but a brief interval, and the foe would be upon them.

Could he and the Indian hurl them back?

It seemed to the boy as though the supreme moment of his life had arrived, and that he must arouse himself to the utmost in order to meet the emergency.

With a cry to the dusky offspring of a chief he sprang to the stockade.

As he looked over, he could see a confused medley approaching.

The capricious moon took occasion at this particular moment, when her light was most valuable to our young friends, to hide her face behind a passing cloud.

This seemed a bad omen, since it must, of necessity, injure their aim.

Beggars must not be choosers, however, and, under the circumstances, they would have to do the best they could.

Closer still swept the cavalcade.

"Make every shot tell," said Karl, with a strange tremor in his voice, for which he could hardly be blamed under the circumstances.

"Me wait—moon come soon mebbe. You, Karl, tell me when shoot," replied the Sioux, by which he meant he would hold his fire until the cowboy gave the signal.

Karl swept a glance aloft; it was even as Little Buckshot declared—the moon was already trembling on the edge of the cloud, ready to smile upon the silent earth once more.

But the onrushing horsemen were perilously near, so that when the illumination came it must be the signal for their opening fire.

That moment was a supreme one in Karl's young life. It seemed as though he lived ages in a very few seconds of time, and his shoulders had to bear the world's burden, as did those of Atlas of old.

Now the light began to come.

He meant to call out again to Little Buckshot to steady him, though such a thing were hardly needed with the Indian, but, just at this juncture something brushed Karl's elbow, something that was more in his mind than his own safety.

It was Polly!

The girl had, in some manner, secured a pistol while among the cabins of the outlaw settlement; perhaps Jasper Hosmer had placed it in her possession in order that she could defend herself from insult. Be that as it might, she was full of pluck, and quite determined to share Karl's danger, no matter what followed.

He could not deny her the privilege, knowing what grave issues were at stake. Indeed, there was no time to speak, for the moment had arrived when action became a paramount issue.

And now the oncoming posse of horsemen gave tongue, just as Karl expected; but he was almost

paralyzed when, instead of the fierce shouts of the lawless desperadoes, he heard the well-remembered cowboy yell, saw a dozen hands swinging hats high in air, and even caught a voice he recognized as Cuthbert's shrieking:

"Karl, Karl, don't shoot! we're the boys from Sunset Ranch! Karl! oh, Karl!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST ROUND-UP.

It seemed almost too good to be true.

Karl dug his knuckles into his eyes and looked again, to see the wild riders swinging up with vociferous shouts of hearty welcome and congratulation. He could even distinguish Mr. Kelly and Old Sile, together with the shrieking Virginia boy in the van, and all were waving sombreros like people possessed.

Into Karl's heart there crept a peace such as he had never known before—a spirit of gratitude that brought tears to his eyes, so great was the revulsion of feeling. A minute before he had been almost at the point of despair, and nerved to take human life if need be in order to defend Polly, while now the spirit of war fled to give place to the gentle dove of peace.

He turned to Polly. Their hands met in a fervent clasp; not a word was exchanged, but the tears that glistened in her eyes, as well as the glow of satisfaction illuminating his face, spoke eloquently enough.

Already the Indian was on top of the stockade, brandishing his arms and giving vent to whoops that voiced his sentiments. Little Buckshot could meet death without a tremor, but life had charms for the son of a chief with a future before him, and he flung aside his stoical ways for once to allow his natural feelings full swing.

There Karl joined him as soon as he could command his limbs; and there he swung his old weather-beaten felt hat with right good will to welcome the coming of the boys.

Their startling appearance on the scene was a deep mystery to him. He still believed they had been chased by the furious spirits of the settlement, and how these worthies came to be changed into his old comrades of ranch and range life was beyond his comprehension.

So they came pouring in, leaping from their horses as they drew up.

Cuthbert was the first to seize upon Karl, and he hugged him like a bear, such was the intensity of his emotions.

"Old fellow, I'm awful glad to see you again. And you've done yourself proud. There isn't a man on the range, Old Sile says, could have made a neater job of it. I'm proud of you, I am. And where's Polly, dear little Polly. She's my cousin, Karl, the very cousin I've been chasing around after for a year. What d'ye think? It's all come out, and is almost too wonderful for belief."

Another minute and he found Polly, who was crying in Mr. Kelly's arms—Polly, who had borne up so bravely through all the perils of the last few days, now asserting her right to the woman's refuge in tears.

They were a happy crowd, indeed.

The boys had only one regret, and this that they might not have a touch-and-go bit of warfare with the evil spirits who made their abiding place in the fastness of the Bad Lands. But Mr. Kelly knew his little band would be greatly outnumbered by the bad men, and also that these choice characters were desperate fighters who would play havoc in the ranks of his range riders should they be attacked at home. Accordingly, he gave orders that the journey toward the ranch should be immediately resumed.

Cuthbert hovered around Karl and Polly like an

"old hen brooding over her chicks," as he himself laughingly expressed it.

They were doubly dear to him after having gone through such peril.

By degrees, Karl learned from Mr. Kelly just how it came about that the cowboys were near the village at the time of the stampede, and guessed so well how affairs lay that they followed the fugitives in post haste.

Old Sile had taken his party into the place by means of a roundabout way, so that when they finally came upon the outcasts' settlement it was from the north, exactly opposite to that point where the boys' advance was made.

When the stampede occurred, Old Sile was in the village scouting about. He had seen Polly go to the spring, swinging her pail; had watched her vanish beyond, and even detected the presence of someone who met her.

The old ranger was capable of grasping things that were in his line, and he started back to join his comrades with the information that some one, presumably Karl, had been before them, and that the girl was already in full flight.

Then came the wild stampede that caused Old Sile to chuckle. Well did he know what meaning could be attached to such a confused uproar.

The Indian whoops puzzled him a little, but he never once lost faith in the notion that Karl was the leading spirit in the game.

Although they had seen the three flying figures ahead, they had not been able to make sure of their identity, which was the chief reason why they maintained silence up to the time our boys took to the stone fort.

It had all ended well.

Looking back and seeing how many chances there were for a slip in the programme, Karl was satisfied

that a good fortune had surely attended their actions. They had mapped out their plan and carried it through as well as they were able, but much of their success was due to a favoring Providence.

They had nothing to fear longer.

The desperadoes would think well before setting out to pursue a posse of Sunset Ranch cowboys, and even did they possess such a desire for open warfare, it was doubtful whether they could collect a dozen mounts all told inside of six hours, so well had Little Buckshot accomplished his work in the corral. There is nothing more effective than the freshly-taken skin of a grizzly bear to excite lasting terror in a Western broncho.

They took it easy on the way home.

Only a few days had elapsed since Karl, Cuthbert and Polly were together, and yet it seemed an age—so much had happened since.

Their tongues wagged almost incessantly all day, and there seemed a never-ending succession of subjects to be discussed.

All were in a merry mood, and at evening, seated by the camp-fire, the three entertained their cowboy friends with many a song, some of the range riders joining in a chorus when it struck the popular fancy.

Karl did not realize how thoroughly worn out he had been by the expedition until he at length rolled himself in his blanket and sought rest in slumber.

He knew nothing more until aroused by the cowboy reveille, the beating of a frying pan, to summon the party to breakfast.

It may be safely assumed that the young son of a chief was not neglected when congratulations were going around.

Mr. Kelly had in mind a suitable present which he meant to give Little Buckshot and which would doubtless make him happy.

But nothing could ever equal the pride with which

the young buck exhibited his healing wounds, and pointed to his neck, where hung the newly-made necklace of grizzly bear claws.

From that hour he was fitted to wear the moccasins of his famous old father, the chief, since none might question his valor.

At last they sighted the long, low building of Sunset Ranch.

What a homecoming it was!

Every one appeared wild with joy, shouting and firing guns in the air, careering over the prairie and showing such satisfaction as only cowboys may.

The alarm bell added its wild clang to the general confusion; cattle, catching the excitement, belowed most lustily; sheep dogs barked, horses neighed as they pranced hither and thither, and, taken in all, it was a scene of exhilaration such as the boys had never participated in before.

There stood good Mrs. Kelly at the horse block in front of the door, waving her white apron in one hand and ringing a big dinner bell with the other, bent upon doing her share to make the wanderers' return a jubilee.

And little Polly was soon gathered to her matronly bosom, where she once more allowed her tears to flow, only they were of greatest joy, not woe.

Karl was well pleased with the way things had turned out.

No one had been injured, and their plan of effecting the release of Polly had been a complete success.

He knew Jasper Hosmer would never have another opportunity to steal the girl away. Indeed, his life was not worth the snap of one's fingers if ever seen around Sunset Ranch again, for each and every cowboy had registered a solemn vow to end his loping on sight.

Karl and Cuthbert did not resume the old life. Their plans were arranged for the future, though this wonderful discovery concerning Polly came near changing matters.

It was finally agreed, however, that, for the winter, the young girl should remain with the Kellys, who meant to go to Southern California.

Karl and Cuthbert enjoyed the last few weeks on the range hugely.

There was a mournful pleasure in doing everything for the last time.

Even a soaking rain, when taking a turn at night wrangling the saddle horses, was accepted in the light of a joke, for it makes all the difference in the world whether one undertakes a hardship as a duty or a species of sport.

They scoured the country, visiting every familiar bit of territory, while Old Sile was making preparations for their winter campaign. Here Cuthbert had caught his prize fish in the cool waters of the river where they gurgled over the old logs and other obstructions that formed the Riffles; there Karl had had his encounter with a steer that had gone mad in the August sun, and caught him afoot; in this place the stampede had taken them by surprise when an awful thunderstorm broke over the range at midnight.

So it went.

There were hosts of reminiscences that flooded their minds and made them feel sad, even while they gloried in the prospect that awaited them in the near future.

What fun it was to hunt the lurking wolf; to chase the bounding jack rabbit; to smell all the familiar sweet odors of their beloved prairie.

They enjoyed it all to the full.

Each day brought its pleasures; the weather was crisp and clear, and it seemed as though nature were

exerting herself to the utmost in order to make amends for the past.

Little Buckshot, loaded with honors and presents, had departed to his people; a prouder young buck certainly never bestrode a pony than he seemed to be on the morning he left the ranch, turning several times to wave a dignified and graceful farewell to his paleface friends.

They would never forget him, and the boys, remembering the circumstances when they first made his acquaintance and the opinion they had then formed, were prone to believe that even the best judges of human nature may sometimes be mistaken.

Mr. Kelly brought great news one night on his return from Helena, whither he had gone on business connected with making a heavy shipment of cattle East.

At last the Government had been aroused to the fact that the Bad Lands harbored a nest of vipers in the shape of every refugee driven from mining camp, border settlement and cattle ranch within hundreds of miles.

A force of cavalymen had been sent out to break up the gang, and bring a few of the most noted desperadoes to judgment.

The result had been something of a pitched battle, in which the troopers lost several men, but inflicted terrible damage upon the outcast horde, scattering them to the four winds, capturing a few, and leaving others for the coyotes.

It was a great day for the cattle rangers when this settlement was utterly wiped out by fire and the sword.

Perhaps less damage would be done among the horses and cattle during the winter months, with these thieves scattered through the country.

And Mr. Kelly privately told the boys he had

good reason to believe Jasper Hosmer had this time really paid nature's debt, for he was reckoned among those who fell in the stormy scenes attending the cavalry charge on the outlaws' den.

Of course this news gave satisfaction, for in the eyes of the boys Hosmer was something of an ogre, who had carried the princess off to his enchanted castle, where he meant to detain her until the showers of golden coin rained down from her lips, as in the fairy story; and now that he was under the daisies, they could go off upon their winter hunt with more confidence that all would be well with Polly.

Old Sile entered into the business with much enthusiasm.

It stirred up memories of days long since numbered with the past, days when he had been a trapper by profession, daring the perils of the almost unknown Northwest, to collect precious pelts under the very noses of Blackfeet and Crows, who hated his kind most bitterly, and never neglected an opportunity to wipe a trapper from the face of the earth.

With unlimited means and such judgment as long experience had given him, the veteran was very apt to collect such material as would most conduce to their comfort while in the wilderness.

At the same time he knew all about the difficulties of transportation, and did not mean to take along more than they could conveniently "tote" over a carry, when such a thing became necessary.

With good guns, plenty of ammunition, and a supply of modern steel traps of the best make, he reckoned they ought to pull along until spring, and get fat in the bargain—all of which the future alone could decide.

Sunset Ranch days were almost over, so far as the boys were concerned, for it was not their inten-

tion to return to the X bar X outfit, for any length of time, at least, even in the spring.

Other plans awaited their attention, Cuthbert having long desired to see the Land of the Montezumas, where a cousin operated a curious ranch and had lately insisted on a visit from the young Virginian, throwing out mysterious remarks about some long forgotten mine once worked by the Dons when Spain was at the height of her glory and ruled the world.

Before the time came for the final breaking up, the young range riders were given an opportunity to indulge in a last round-up, when the cattle were selected for shipment, it being Mr. Kelly's desire to thin out his vast herds in order that he might carry as little worry with him to sunny California as possible.

They entered into the game with more zest than ever before.

Somehow there is always a peculiar charm about what might once have seemed an onerous duty, when doing it for the last time.

Cuthbert fairly outdid himself in "milling" his bunch of cattle and heading off stragglers. His shout was as strong as the war whoop of a Sioux brave out for loot, and his rope fell true every time with marvelous precision, so that Karl was more than proud of the expert cowboy, who had so recently graduated from the tenderfoot class.

And, as on that former occasion, when he witnessed his first round-up, Cuthbert climbed to the roof of Sunset Ranch to cast his eyes around upon the stirring scene, to gaze upon the galloping herds heading from every quarter toward the grand corral, with cowboys circling around, shouting, waving their hats, slapping their chaps with quirts, in order to startle a sluggish steer, or darting out like arrows from the bow, so as to head off a straggler—

what a stirring spectacle and how it must thrill the veins of the lad, who, during his apprenticeship on the range, had grown to love ranch life charms!

Then came the hot work of separating the herds, picking out those intended for shipment, and confining them in a separate corral, from whence, in the morning, they would be started on the long journey to the shipping station on the railroad.

Altogether, it had been a glorious day, and would live long in the memories of the two lads, now preparing for a change of base.

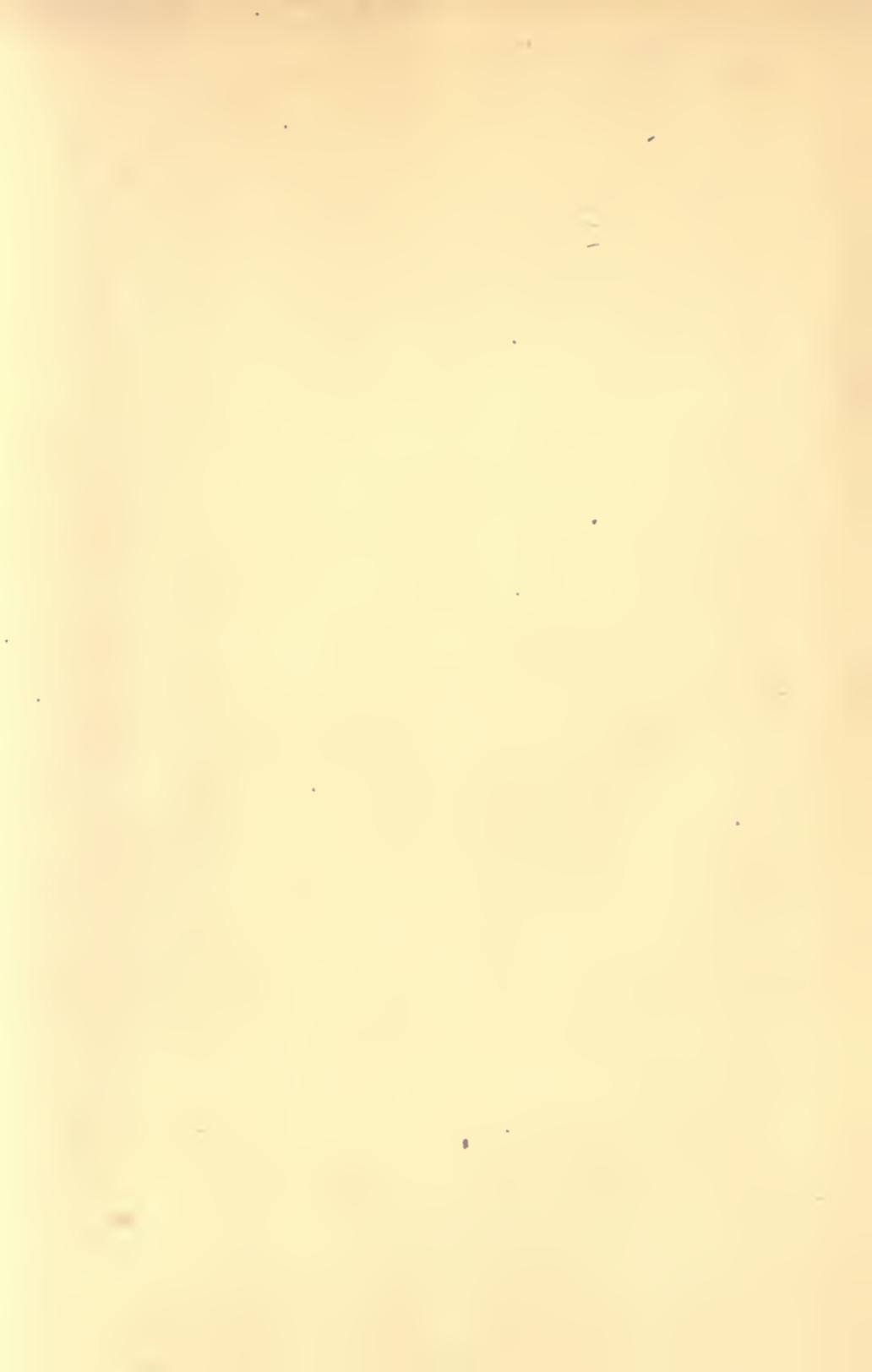
When the sun hung low in the west, like a great red globe, and slanting rays fell athwart the peculiar old long ranch buildings, Cuthbert, together with Karl and Polly, stood there looking around upon the scene that had become so precious.

Their eager eyes took in every detail, from the lowing cattle to the weary knots of cowboys attending to their horses, as if they could thus carry with them for evermore the picture thus presented.

Now the sun had reached the horizon, the shadows lengthened, and night drew near. How peaceful it all looked in the weird glow of that last slanting illumination. In the heart of each the wish arose that thus might it ever be with the beloved ranch in the days that were to come.

And now, with a sigh, they saw the cheery orb of day vanish from view, and each realized, with something of pain, that, for a long time to come, they might not again witness his farewell to Kelly's ranch.

So, with clasped hands and hearts that were a little heavy, in spite of the glorious future awaiting them, they passed from the gloaming into the more cheerful-lighted interior of Sunset Ranch.



26766

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 695 112 3

